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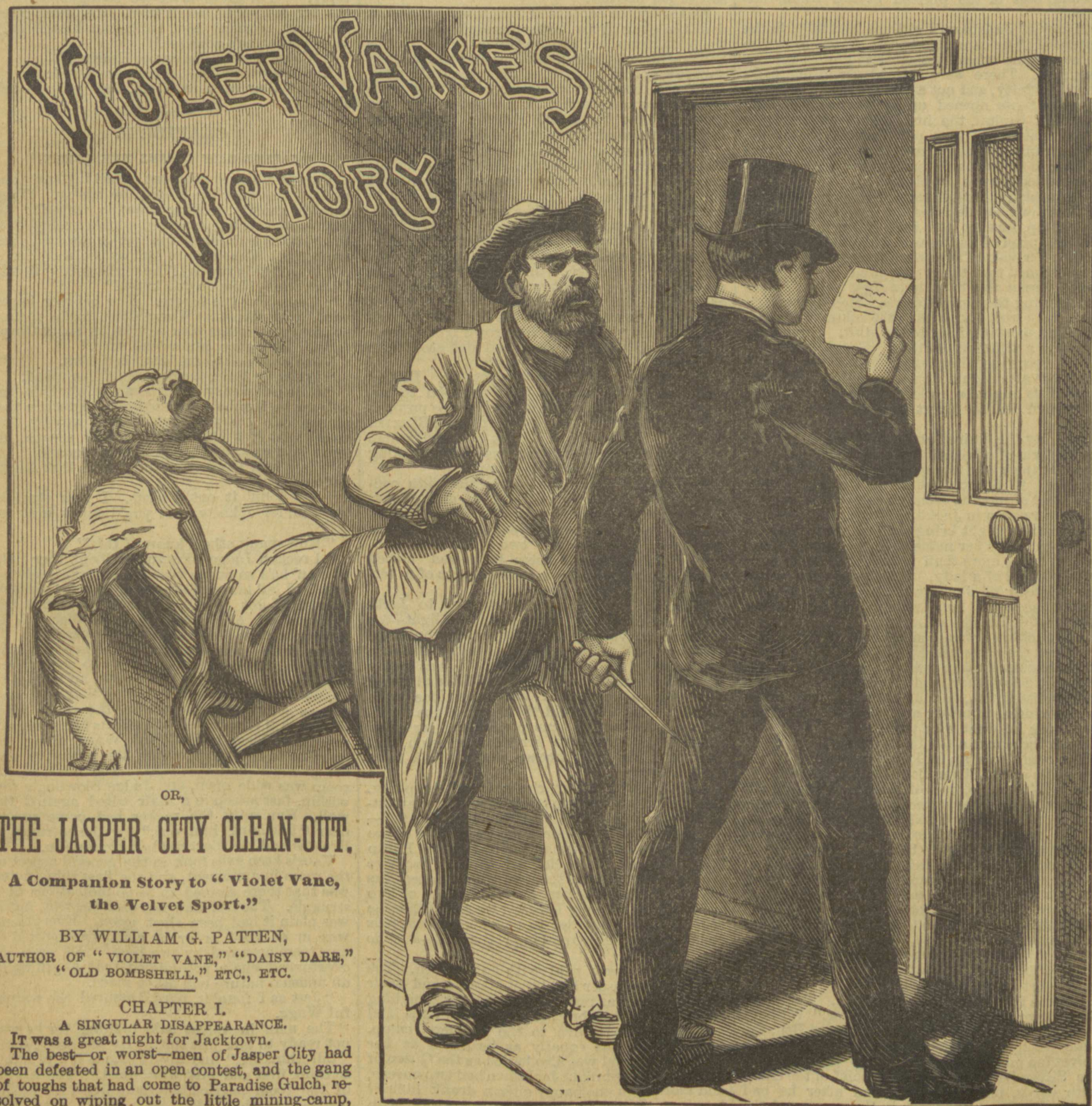
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OR, THE JASPER CITY CLEAN-OUT.

A Companion Story to "Violet Vane,
the Velvet Sport."

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE," "DAISY DARE,"
"OLD BOMBSHELL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SINGULAR DISAPPEARANCE.

It was a great night for Jacktown.
The best—or worst—men of Jasper City had
been defeated in an open contest, and the gang
of toughs that had come to Paradise Gulch, re-
solved on wiping out the little mining-camp,
had returned to the boomers' town in a decided-
ly crestfallen condition.

IN A MOMENT THE VELVET SPORT HAD THE DAGGER AND TELL-TALE PAPER
IN HIS HAND.

This is how it came about:

There was a rivalry between Jacktown and Jasper City, and while the former was the older camp, it had not the "get up and hustle" possessed by its nearest neighbor. Long before the first slab shanty was erected near the spot where Jasper City afterward sprung into existence, Jacktown had flourished like a green bay tree, and had boasted that it was the liveliest camp of its size in the State. But, with the rise of Jasper City there came a change. The best citizens of Jacktown deserted the place for its new-born rival. Some did so voluntarily and some were attracted by the tempting lures which the cunning land-sharps of the boomers' camp dangled before their eyes. Gradually the situation in the little town in Paradise Gulch grew worse, and slowly the citizens who stuck by the place grew desperate.

What could be done?

This was a poser for the Jacktownites. Day by day they saw their glory fading and felt that they were unable to prevent it. The citizens of Jasper sneered at them and openly reviled them, hurling insult after insult into their very teeth. The men of Jacktown were not lacking in courage, and promptly resented every insult, although they 'most always came out second best in the pitched battles which followed.

A few of Jacktown's citizens had faith in the future of their camp, and these sought to devise some scheme whereby their lost glory could be regained. There were several promising lodes in the vicinity, and not a few believed that were some of those opened up by parties who had plenty of capital, the little town would score a boom that would soon put Jasper in the shade. But, strangely enough, men of capital who were willing to invest their money in opening undeveloped lodes were not plenty.

The athletes, dead-shots and all-round fighters of Jacktown had deserted the place for the boomers' camp, leaving the little town in Paradise Gulch sapped of its strength and unable to cope with its rival. There were those in Jacktown who claimed that the crying need of the place was one man able to whip the best men of Jasper at anything they might name. Had they such a man, they would soon have the colors of the Jasper City sports trailing in the dust. Others believed in a different method. Could Jacktown secure some peculiar attraction which would draw the attention of the surrounding country, capitalists might be enticed to that camp, and afterward led to invest some of their capital there.

One day the desired attraction came. It was in the form of a beautiful young girl of not more than eighteen who was searching for her brother, supposed to be somewhere in Colorado. She was tired of moving from place to place, and decided to remain in Jacktown for a while, hoping that fortune might bring her brother to her.

The girl gave her name as Luona Howard, and besides being more than pretty, she had the air and breeding of a lady. She was at once called the "Queen of Jacktown," and her pleasant ways and musical laugh soon gained for her the sobriquet of Laughing Lu.

But Jacktown was soon robbed of its queen, for when the news reached Jasper, the citizens of the boomers' camp resolved on a bold move. Without delay, they made their way to the town in Paradise Gulch, coming upon the place in an overwhelming number; and when they returned Laughing Lu went with them!

Then there was a stir in Jacktown!

The result was an indignation-meeting in the bar room of the Silver Bell Hotel, at which time Judge Blowbugle, one of Jacktown's pompous citizens, made a fiery speech and called for some one to come forward and champion the cause of the camp. A decidedly ragged and seedy-appearing vagrant, who hailed to the name of Erastus Wagg, and called himself the "riginal woolly-headed man," came promptly forward. He was followed by a small, foppish-appearing stranger, attired in a black velvet suit, b'iled shirt, high silk hat, and wearing a bunch of fresh mountain violets in a button-hole. The inmates of the saloon thought that they had struck a tenderfoot, and without delay sought to have some sport at the dandy's expense.

But the fun came the other way. The little stranger proved to be a "holy terror." Without any trouble at all, he whipped Blizzard Ben, the acknowledged "chief" of the town. Then the velvet fop got at Dandy Dirk, the proprietor of the Silver Bell, and really the chief of the camp with cards, pistols or fists, and after he had beaten Dandy at draw poker, the wearer of the violets knocked him out in a fistie encounter.

Whereupon the stranger, who had given his

name as Violet Vane, was promptly hailed as the best man in Jacktown, Erastus Wagg, the tramp, being among those who shouted the loudest over his victory.

At about this time the regular stage brought Owen Wilson and his beautiful daughter, Ione, to Jacktown.

Mr. Wilson had been connected with an Eastern bank until that bank was robbed, when suspicion turned upon him as having a hand in the job. The gentleman was in danger of arrest when Philip Howard, Ione's lover, confessed that he was one of the robbers and cleared Mr. Wilson. The self-confessed criminal was arrested, but afterward escaped and disappeared.

But the confession of Philip Howard did not entirely clear Owen Wilson of suspicion, and one day he was invited to resign his position or be discharged. He chose to resign and with his beautiful daughter went West. When they arrived at Jacktown, both Mr. Wilson and Ione saw and recognized the Velvet Sport, Violet Vane. It was Philip Howard!

Meantime, in Jasper City Laughing Lu had met an old-time lover, Ned Morris. She had also seen a man who gave his name as Solomon Snide and professed to be a life insurance agent, but whom she believed to be a detective in pursuit of her brother.

Elated by the capture of Jacktown's Queen, a drunken gang from Jasper decided to clean out the little camp in Paradise Gulch. Ned Morris had learned of their intentions and had warned Jacktown of its danger, so that when the gang from the boomers' camp arrived, they were given a warm reception and driven from the place. Violet Vane and Erastus Wagg were prominent among Jacktown's defenders.

After the gang from Jasper City had been driven back, they demanded satisfaction for the damage sustained, for they had lost a number of horses in the battle. It was finally decided to settle the affair in a bloodless manner with cards, Violet Vane pitting his skill against that of High Card Harry, Jasper's champion short-card player. If Vane was defeated, Jacktown should pay for the horses which the men of Jasper City had lost in the scrimmage; if Harry was vanquished, the gang from the boomers' camp was to depart without more ado. Once more the Velvet Sport came off the victor, but the crowd from Jasper was not satisfied till Vane had defeated their champion wrestler, Hickory Jimmy.

Meanwhile Dandy Dirk was not idle. He had seen Ione Wilson and made a resolution to possess her. With this object in view, the proprietor of the Silver Bell hired two ruffians, Blizzard Ben and Tiger Joe, to abduct the girl, which was done while the exciting events were taking place on the outskirts of the camp.

As soon as Violet Vane learned the truth concerning the dastardly outrage, he and Wagg, together with a number of Jacktown's citizens, started in pursuit of the kidnappers. Vane was the first to overtake the two scoundrels, and, single-handed, fought them both and hurled them down to their doom in the depths of a terrible sink-hole called Pluto's Pit.

When the victorious party returned to Jacktown they found the place ablaze with light—for darkness had fallen—and wild with enthusiasm. The news of the Velvet Sport's wonderful battle had preceded him and all Jacktown was ready to do the champion honor. A life and drum corps was on hand, and Vane and Ione were escorted into camp amid the shouts of the multitude and the roar of some anvils which served as cannon. It was the grandest occasion that Jacktown had ever known and the little town did itself proud.

At Silver Bell a surprise awaited the party. Dandy Dirk *alias* Thomas Alicar had been arrested by the little detective, "Solomon Snide"—properly Alan Dale—for being the robber of the Burnton Bank. Dale had not been after Philip Howard at all, for he claimed to have positive proof that Alicar was the man who planned the job and carried it out with the aid of one or two accomplices. Young Howard confessed that he was the robber in order to save his sweetheart's father from disgrace and imprisonment—a noble act.

Jacktown went wild with enthusiasm. The tongs from Jasper had been defeated and their stolen Queen was restored to them, for Laughing Lu had found her brother in Violet Vane and had refused to return to the boomers' camp. Ione Wilson was equally as beautiful as her lover's sister and was also hailed as the Queen of the camp. That night Jacktown had two queens, and more than one happy citizen drank himself into insensibility in trying to get away with the numberless toasts to the Queens of Jacktown.

The Velvet Sport found it no easy job to escape from his admiring friends. Erastus Wagg and Judge Blowbugle were among the most enthusiastic, and the amount of "tanglefoot" which they disposed of was amazing. When Vane finally tore himself from them, the camp tramp and the judge were in a decidedly "balmy" condition.

When midnight had passed the excitement began to subside, and by two o'clock the town was as silent as if nothing unusual had occurred. Between that hour and daybreak strange things transpired in Jacktown.

The Velvet Sport was awakened by a heavy knocking on the door of the room in which he had slept.

"Hello!" he cried. "Who is there?"

"It's me, pard," was the immediate reply in a voice which Vane instantly recognized as belonging to Erastus Wagg. "I hate most mightily ter break yer beauty slumber, Sweet Violets, but ther fack is ther devil hes bruck loose an' I reckon ye'd better cum see 'bout it."

"What's that?" demanded Vane, sharply, being in none too pleasant a mood for being aroused in such a manner. "What are you driving at?"

"He's gone, pard," was Wagg's rather vague reply. "I'm givin' it ter ye straight fer I've bin ter see an' he hain't thar. H's disappeared like ther mornin' dew, an' Satan hisself only knows whar he's gone ter."

"Whose gone? His name, Erastus?"

And the woolly-headed man answered:

"Thet thar varmint o' sin, Dandy Dirk—he's sloped!"

CHAPTER II.

"JASPER CITY CLAIMS HER QUEEN!"

VIOLET VANE sprung out of bed instantly and opened the door to admit the tramp. Wagg came in quickly, looking none the worse for the night's racket, but appeared a little excited over the startling information which he had just imparted. Vane caught him by the shoulder.

"What's this you say?" he demanded. "Dandy Dirk gone? How do you know?"

"'Cause I've bin ter see. You bet yer boots, pard, thet Erastus Wagg don't make menny crooked statements w'en he tries ter shout Gospil facks. He's gone, plum dead sure."

Vane hastened to get into his clothes.

"Where is Dale, the detective?" he asked.

"Give us an easy one! Thar hain't hide ner ha'r ter be foun' o' either o' them. I reckon thet p'r'aps he's bin putt out o' ther way by ther cusses w'at got Dandy out o' ther scrape. It looks thet way, by ther jumpin' jimcracks!"

"How long since you discovered that Alicar had escaped?"

"Jes' foun' it out, Violets. I kem straight ter you, fer I knew thet you'd know w'at ter do."

"How many others know of this?"

"I reckon Judge Blowbugle's 'bout ther only one, an' he's so numb thet he kin skeercely git roun'. I lef' him in ther room, whar he sed he'd stay till I got back. He tried ter drink Ole Wooltop off his pins, but foun' ther job er mighty big one fer er galoot o' his size."

The little sport spent no more time in asking questions, but he was soon ready to accompany the eccentric vagrant. He paused an instant to glance out of the window, noting that, although it was not far from sunrise, the entire town seemed still sleeping off the effects of the night's carouse. Then he followed Wagg along the corridor to the room which the detective and his prisoner had occupied. The door of the room was wide open, and Judge Blowbugle was within, fast asleep in a chair tilted against the wall. Evidently the racket had come pretty near "knocking him out," for the entrance of Erastus and the sport did not arouse him.

Vane's keen eyes took in the general aspect of the room in a moment, and the first thing noted was that there seemed to be no indications of a struggle. The bed had not been slept in, but it was plain it had been slept upon. Everything was in as good order as could be expected in any room occupied by two men. Not even an overturned chair proclaimed that anything of an unusual nature had taken place.

"Jest as I foun' it, pard," assured the watchful Wagg.

The man in velvet said nothing, for he was not ready to talk just then. He was doing some "tall thinking," and always made it a practice to think first and talk afterward. The aspect of the room puzzled him not a little, for he did not believe that Alan Dale was a man who could be taken by surprise and overcome without a struggle. Finally he shook his head.

"I reckon we will find the prisoner safe enough, Erastus," he smiled.

Wagg looked amazed.

"W'at d'yer mean?" he gasped.

"I hardly think that he has escaped," declared Vane. "Probably the detective has taken him from this room for some reason of his own."

"Jeehocus! w'at a blamed ole fool I be!" grunted the tramp. "I never thort o' thet, an' I reckon thet ther jedge wuz too fur paralyzed ter think o' ennythin'. Jest hear him snore!"

Regardless of their presence, Blowbugle was still sleeping, and was snoring in a truly terrific manner.

"We shall find Dale and the prisoner somewhere in the house, I think," observed Vane, as he turned to leave; but, at that moment, a piece of paper, pinned to the door by a small dagger, caught his eye.

"Ha! what is this?" he cried, as he sprung forward.

In a moment the Velvet Sport had the dagger and the tell-tale paper in his hand, and this is what he read:

"Good-by to poor fools who thought they had me fast! I am a hard man to catch and still harder to hold. My arrest was a trick which deceived you all, for Alan Dale, the detective, is no detective at all, but is one of my well-paid tools who stands ready to come or go at my motion. Let the Velvet dandy beware, for he shall hear from me when he least expects such a thing. To my enemies I am worse than poison.
DANDY DIRK."

Truly a startling message.

Wagg was watching the sport's face and instantly saw that the paper contained something of an unusual nature, for he asked:

"W'at is it, pard? Hes ther blamed critter got erway arter all?"

"That is about the size of it, I reckon," confessed Vane. "You were right, Erastus, and I was wrong."

"Jaythutter! you don't say so!"

"Yes, it is a scandalous fact. We all have been beautifully sold and I feel like kicking myself for a thick-headed clown. But I don't know whether to believe this paper or not."

"W'at's it say, pard? Read it. Durn ef I've got mer spectacles hyer."

Then the sport read the note aloud for Erastus.

"Jeehocus! Ther durned imp o' Satan hes bruck loose arter all. An' ther dashed detective wuz er fraud?"

"It looks that way," Vane acknowledged; "but, for all that, it may not be true. Tom Alicar would not hesitate to tell a lie if it would gall us in any way. Perhaps the detective was white."

"But it don't look that way."

"That is what I said, but we will have more proof before we condemn him. He may have been tricked and overpowered by the prisoner."

"Wal, w'at are ye goin' ter do, pard?"

"I am going to capture Dandy Dirk," was the quiet reply.

"Whoopee! Thet's ther stuff! I'm with ye, Sweet Violets, bone, mussil, sinew an' rags? I calkerlate thet atween us we kin scoop ther varlet an' not hafe try."

"We shall have more than one person to contend with, Erastus, for he will probably enlist a gang of ruffians in his service. He is a desperate man and will make a hard fight."

"Ther harder ther better. I'm ther kind o' a rosebud as likes er leetle kercitement jest ter keep mer blood frum gittin' stagnant. You kin count on me, pard. Hello! w'at's that?"

There was a sudden commotion in the house, the sound of a closing door was followed by heavy footsteps and hoarse shouts. Revolver in hand, Violet Vane sprung through the open doorway just in time to confront an excited man, who was rushing wildly along the corridor. The sport caught him by the shoulder, exclaiming:

"Mr. Wilson—you! What is the trouble?"

It was indeed Owen Wilson, and the Easterner looked half-crazed and wholly frightened. For a moment he lifted his hand as if to dash aside the grasp which detained him, but the sport's revolver disappeared like a flash, and he caught Mr. Wilson by the wrist, crying sharply:

"Slow and easy! Are you blind, sir, that you cannot recognize your friends?"

A light of recognition flashed in Wilson's eyes, and he hoarsely gasped:

"Philip—thank God! Rouse the town, Phil! Stir them up! Quick, or it may be too late! Why do you stand like a statue? Make haste, for the love of Heaven!"

The man's words were almost incoherent, and his manner that of one who had received a

severe mental shock. For a moment Vane thought him deranged, and his thoughts found expression in words.

"Are you crazy? What is the meaning of—"

"No, no! I am not crazy. You are wasting time. Call for aid! Help! help!"

Then the Velvet Sport's hand closed over Mr. Wilson's lips, effectually stopping his wild cries. To his ears came the sound of slamming doors and hurrying feet. Already was the house aroused, and he knew that in a few moments they would be surrounded by a gaping throng. He must learn the truth before the crowd arrived.

"It is you who are wasting time, Mr. Wilson," came sharply from his lips. "Tell me the truth so that I may know what to do. What is the trouble?"

Something seemed to suddenly restore Owen Wilson to his senses, for he gasped:

"The girls—Ione, Luona—"

"What of them?"

"My God—gone, both gone!"

The Velvet Sport waited to hear no more. With Erastus Wagg close at his heels, he sprung away along the corridor, hurrying toward the room to which the two girls had retired the night before. He was confronted by one or two persons who had been aroused by the cries of the excited man, but he hurled them aside as if they were children, paying no heed to their eager questions. Reaching the room, he found the door slightly ajar, but it was not without an involuntary feeling of hesitation that he swung it wide open.

The room was indeed empty.

"Here, Erastus," came crisply from Vane; "stand by the door while I make an inspection, and admit no one but Mr. Wilson."

"I'll do thet same, mer posy," said the vagrant, promptly. "Ef enny one tries ter crowd over me, they'll fine thet I'm er b-a-a-d man frum ther rustlin' leetle town o' Red Hot."

The Velvet Sport, examining the room, saw that, unlike the room he had lately left, there were evidences of a struggle. The bedclothes had been partially torn from the bed and everything seemed to indicate that one or more of the blankets had been used to smother the cries of the unfortunate girls. But, it was also evident that the ruffians had known how to carry out their work, for the poor girls had not made noise enough to arouse those of their friends who slept nearest them.

A cloud settled on Violet Vane's face as he noted the general aspect of things. Suddenly his attention was arrested by a slip of paper which was pinned to the door in the same way that the one had been which he found in the room from which the prisoner had escaped. He did not have to remove the paper to read the five words written upon it. They were:

"Jasper City claims her Queen!"

CHAPTER III.

SOLID SID SEEKS ASSISTANCE.

BARELY had Violet Vane read the words written upon the paper which was pinned to the door by the tiny dagger when that door was hurled open and Owen Wilson staggered into the room. The unfortunate parent was nearly distracted by grief and excitement. Seizing Vane's hand, he cried:

"Where is she? What have they done with her—my darling?"

For answer, the sport pointed at the writing on the slip of paper.

"What does it mean?" hoarsely asked the Easterner.

"It means that your daughter will probably be found in Jasper City," was Vane's calm reply. "Brace up, Mr. Wilson. Things may not be as bad as they seem. This is a wild country, and strange things transpire here."

"But I feared that she had again fallen into the hands of villains like those who kidnapped her yesterday. The thought nearly drove me frantic."

"We will hope that Fate has been more kind to her. You knew that Jasper City claims my sister as Queen of the camp. The words on that slip of paper seem to indicate that, although defeated, Jasper does not intend to give up her Queen. They came for my sister some time in the night, and finding Ione with her, carried away both of the girls."

"Thank Heaven that it is no worse!" came slowly from Mr. Wilson's lips, as he sunk down upon a chair. "There must be honest men in Jasper City."

"Without doubt there is. If the girls are in that camp they are comparatively safe."

"If they are!" exclaimed the shaken parent.

"What do you mean by that 'if'? Does not that slip of paper prove beyond a doubt where they are?"

"We will hope that it does," returned Vane, "but we are not sure of it till we know. I shall take immediate steps to find out the truth."

"Heaven aid you, Philip! God grant that my poor girl may be restored unharmed to my arms!"

"Amen."

At this moment Erastus Wagg thrust his head in at the door and cried:

"Dunno but I shell hev ter hev reinforcements hyer, pard, fer they are cumin' by ther leetle millyon an' all yoopin' ter know w'at ther racket's erbout."

"Stand them off for three minutes, Erastus, and I will explain. Get the drop on the gang and hold them back."

"Ay, ay, old man: I'll do thet same. Ef they attempt to climb me w'en I hold the drop, they'll think they hev tackled a bigger job than mountin' Pike's Peak, by jimcracks!"

Then Wagg's head disappeared and the door closed with a slam.

Hurriedly Vane continued his inspection, but found nothing more that could aid him in determining the fate of the unfortunate young women. The room was at the front of the building and a window which stood wide open seemed to indicate that the kidnappers had entered and made their exit there. But, the shrewd little sport knew that appearances were oftentimes deceptive, and so examined the window stool closely to see if he could discover any indications that the kidnappers had entered through the open window. He found nothing from which he could draw a conclusion.

Once more his eyes fell upon the slip of paper tacked to the door by the tiny dagger and he made haste to possess it, for he fancied that he had seen similar writing before. Then he turned to Owen Wilson.

"You gave the alarm as soon as you discovered that the girls were missing, did you, Mr. Wilson?"

"As soon as I could comprehend that they had been foully dealt with."

"How did you learn that they were gone?"

"When I arose I discovered that the door of this room was standing slightly ajar. Of course I thought that somewhat singular and I at once determined to learn the meaning of it. My knocks failed to elicit any answer, and when I looked into the room I found it as you now see it."

"There has been bold work done here," declared the sport. "It is evident the girls were carried out of this room by the way of that door. If that is true, the kidnappers must have had friends in this house. There is something rotten in Denmark!"

"I beg you, Philip, not to lose time in useless speculations," entreated the Easterner. "Make all haste to effect the rescue of the poor girls."

"It is better to go slow and sure than to rush and make a failure. There is such a thing as overshooting the mark, sir."

At almost any other time Owen Wilson would have recognized the sound logic of those words, but just then his nerves were quite unstrung and it seemed that the sport in velvet was needlessly wasting time. Vane read the thought on the face of the excited parent, and coming forward, he laid his hand on the gentleman's shoulder, while he said, earnestly:

"Trust in me, Mr. Wilson. I promise you that there shall be no unnecessary delay. It is my sister, as well as your daughter, who is in danger. You know how much Ione is to me, and you should know that I will leave no stone unturned but I will find and rescue her. Luona has a lover, Ned Morris, who, I am confident, will stand by me through thick and thin, and will lay down his life for my sister, if it is necessary. All I ask of you, Mr. Wilson, is that you remain quiet and permit me to do what I think best."

Calmed by the young man's words, Mr. Wilson consented to trust all in Vane's hands. Then the level-headed little sport advanced to the door, beyond which he could hear the clamor of many voices. True to his word, the camp tramp was holding the throng back before the muzzles of his long-barreled revolvers. As Vane appeared with uplifted hand the Babel of voices became hushed.

With a few well-chosen words, the sport explained everything in a satisfactory manner, but the indignation of the crowd on learning the truth can be better imagined than described. Fierce oaths and cries of rage from their lips, all directed toward the men of Jasper who had played them such a trick.

As soon as he could make himself heard above the uproar, Violet Vane cried:

"Where is Ned Morris?"

"Here," was the instant reply as Laughing Lu's lover pushed forward. "I have been to Jasper for some of my more valuable personal property and have just returned. What is this I hear about the girls being kidnapped?"

Grasping Morris by the arm, the little man in velvet drew him into the room where Owen Wilson still remained, bidding Wagg remain outside to still restrain the curious crowd, a thing which the faithful old fellow readily consented to do. In a few moments Vane succeeded in making everything clear to Ned, and but for a restraining hand and calm words, the startled youth would have become as excited as Mr. Wilson had been.

"Keep cool, Ned!" commanded Vane, his hands on the other's shoulders. "It is a cool head and steady hand that is wanted now. We shall find enemies on every hand to pit our skill against, and if we are rattled it will be the worse for us."

"You are right," acknowledged the young man, instantly becoming calm. "We shall need cool heads in Jasper City, for the town is in the hands of a gang of toughs who are running things as they please and have inaugurated a perfect reign of terror."

"How long has this been?"

"Since the gang returned from this place last night. There is a prospect of a battle between the honest men and the toughs of the camp. If I am not mistaken, there will soon be warm times in Jasper City."

"One thing is certain; we shall have the honest men on our side."

"Sure."

"But, there is one point which I wish to settle before I leave this hotel, and that is; was the room adjoining this occupied last night?"

"It was," asserted Mr. Wilson. "I am sure of it, for I tried to obtain it in order that I might be as near my daughter as possible."

"And now," said Vane, "the question is; is it still occupied? Ned, I propose that we investigate."

"But, what is the object?"

"This: if that room was occupied last night, whoever was in it must have heard something of the noise which the kidnappers made, however careful they were. It is possible—or probable—that whoever occupied the adjoining room had a hand in this dastardly work, and by beginning right there, we may get on track of the scoundrels."

Two minutes later Ned and the Velvet Sport were in the room which was separated from the one which the girls had occupied by merely a thin board partition. It was tenantless.

"The indications are that its occupants have sloped," said Vane, grimly. "I will bet five to one that they had a finger in the pie."

"But why is it necessary to go to all this trouble when we know quite well where to find the girls?"

"Do we know where to find them?"

The question startled Ned Morris as a sudden clap of thunder might have done. He caught his breath and grasped the arm of the little sport as he asked:

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that Ione and Luona may not have been carried to Jasper City."

"What makes you think so?"

Vane produced two slips of paper.

"This," said he, "I found on the door of the girls' room; this I found on the door of the room from which Dandy Dirk escaped. Can you see any similarity in the handwriting?"

"Yes, the same hand wrote both of those!"

"Exactly. That means that the same person had a hand in both jobs, and I am willing to give big odds that Tom Alicar is the one into whose hands the girls have fallen."

"Gods! I believe you are right. But why did you not say so before?"

"Simply because I did not want Mr. Wilson to suspect what I fear. He is nearly crazed now; that would quite upset him."

"I see. You think that this slip which you found upon the door of the girls' room was put there to mislead us?"

"I think that it may have been put there for that purpose. At the same time it is not impossible that, though he has the girls in his power, Dandy Dirk has fled to Jasper. He may have decided to gather the ruffians of that camp around him and make a desperate fight."

At that moment Erastus Wagg thrust his head in at the door and called:

"Gent from Jasper City wants to see ye, Sweet Violets. He's in an all-smokin' hurry, too."

"Show him into this room," said Vane, promptly.

Wagg's woolly head disappeared, and a few seconds later, the door swung open to admit a man who would command attention anywhere, for he was at least six feet tall and must have weighed two hundred pounds. But at a glance any one could see that there was not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon him; everything was bone and muscle. An exclamation broke from Ned Morris's lips as his eyes fell upon the magnificent form of the man from Jasper.

"Solid Sid."

"That's your humble servant," bowed the big man, "Solid Sid, Marshal of Jasper City. Do I have the honor of meeting the little sport who cleaned out the best men of both Jacktown and Jasper?" with his eyes fastened curiously on the Velvet Sport.

"Yes, sir," replied Ned, promptly, "this is Philip Vane Howard, known in this camp as Violet Vane. Philip, this is Sidney Sharon, Marshal of Jasper City."

Solid Sid extended his hand.

"I am proud to meet you, sir," he declared. "I have heard of you as a mighty bad man to crowd, and that is just the kind of timber I am looking for."

"The pleasure is mutual," said Vane, quietly, as he grasped the marshal's brawny hand.

"Yes, you are just the man I am looking for," repeated Solid Sid. "The devil has broke loose in Jasper City, and I need a good deputy to help me quell the ruction. As soon as I heard what you have done, I struck straight for this camp."

"I am afraid that you have wasted your time, sir, for just at present I have more than both hands full."

The marshal's face fell.

"How is that?" he asked.

Briefly Vane explained.

"Ah!" broke from Solid Sid's lips. "And so you fancy that Dandy Dirk had a hand in the dirty work? Well, if Dirk is the coon you are after, you will find him in Jasper City, for I am ready to take my Bible oath that I saw him there less than two hours ago. And now will you go back to Jasper with me?"

"You may wager your wealth that I will," was the Velvet Sport's reply.

CHAPTER IV.

A PAIR OF ANGRY RASCALS.

It was an angry and sullen gang of half-drunken ruffians who were returning to Jasper City after meeting with defeat in their lawless raid on Jacktown. They had expected to take the camp in Paradise Gulch by surprise, and have no trouble at all in "cleaning" out the place. Just what their real intentions had been they were not willing to confess, but certain it is that Jacktown would have suffered severely had the raid proved a success. It is possible that the drunken scoundrels might have fired the town.

Jacktown owed much to Ned Morris, who had warned the town of its danger. But for him, the place might have been taken by surprise and fallen into the hands of the toughs from Jasper almost without a struggle. But Morris knew that Jasper City would be too hot to hold him after what he had done, for the worst class would consider him a traitor to the place. That was why he hurried back to the boomers' town on the night of the jubilee in Jacktown and secured such personal property as he could comfortably bring away.

Of the Jasper City ruffians, High Card Harry and Hickory Jimmy took the defeat most to heart, although they said less about it than did their companions. Neither of them had been drunk at the time of the raid, but had joined the gang for the excitement of the thing. They had anticipated little resistance from the citizens of the camp in Paradise Gulch, and their defeat at the hands of one man, the dandy sport, Violet Vane, galled them to the quick. Within their hearts they swore to have vengeance.

Both High Card Harry and the champion wrestler had opposed the retreat from Jacktown. It made little difference to them that the Jasper City card-sharp had pledged his word to Violet Vane that if they were defeated they would withdraw and leave the place unmolested in the future. Neither High Card or his athletic pard were men of honor. Their word was as good as their bond, and neither was worth a pinch of snuff. At the time of the fire in Jacktown, which destroyed a single cabin, they had tried very hard to persuade their followers to make another desperate raid on the camp. But the gang had received a lesson which had taken away much of the false courage which Jasper City

"tanglefoot" had instilled into their veins. They wanted to go home and go home they did. The baffled sport and wrestler accompanied them—part of the way.

"Curse that velvet dandy!" gritted Hickory Jimmy, bitterly.

"Double curse him!" came in a low, fierce tone from the card-sharp's lips.

"I have something laid by for him," declared the defeated athlete.

"So have I—a lead pill!"

"In my case it is a bit of cold steel!"

"Oh, we both love him!"

"Yes, dearly!"

Then the two scoundrels looked into each other's eyes and read the deadly determination written there.

"Bet you fifty I down him first," proposed Harry.

"I'll go ye," was the instant reply.

"He has my money."

"An' he pritty nigh broke my neck."

"How in the world did he ever work that last flip on you? I thought you had him foul and was just ready to cheer when he kicked you into the air and sent you over on your back."

"Don't ask me how he dun it! I reckon it's a reg'ler trick in a rough-an'-tumble, but I never had it worked on me before."

"I did not believe that it was in the little insignificant-appearing fop."

"No more did I. I calkerlated on havin' er reg'ler walk-over, but he dun me up jest as easy ez he got erway with you at draw-poker. He's er sardine!"

"The trouble with us is that we were looking for an easy victory. If we had been prepared, it might have been different."

"Well, we'll be ready for him next time."

"And the next time will come mighty soon if I have anything to say about it."

"The sooner ther better it'll suit me. I'd like ter turn back now."

The wrestler's words set High Card Harry to thinking, and for a long time he rode along in silence. Finally he made a motion which Hickory Jim understood, and gradually the two fell back till the entire gang were in advance.

"That is a pretty sight," observed Harry, sarcastically, as he pointed to the straggling crowd ahead.

The wrestler uttered an oath.

"I reckon we owe ther most of it ter him," he growled. "He an' thet ragged tramp shot down more than bafe our hosses."

Nearly half of the crowd were mounted double and a few were walking. The unlucky ones had left their horses dead in the streets of Jacktown, shot down by the defenders of the camp.

"Jim."

"Waal?"

"I'm going back to Jacktown."

"Now?"

"Directly."

"Are you goin' alone?"

"No; you are going with me."

"Is thet all?"

High Card was silent for several moments, apparently thinking deeply. Finally, he asked:

"Do we want any more?"

"Good men are allus handy."

"You are right, but this time we will not enter the camp publicly. Whatever work we do must be done swiftly and silently. We want no one with us who will be an incumbrance."

"What do you propose ter do?"

"Kill the velvet dandy if possible! No man can call Harry Harkman a cheat and live long to boast of doing so."

"An' no man can flop Jim Carnes an' not hear from him erg'in."

"That is the right kind of talk. But even if we do not get a chance at this Violet Vane, I have work to do there."

"What kind of work?"

"Laughing Lu, the Queen of Jasper, is in that camp. I have sworn that she shall be mine by fair means or foul. It is quite apparent that I cannot obtain her by fair means, therefore I shall try foul. But you know everything is fair in love and war. Ha!"

Hickory Jimmy smiled.

"An' you want me ter help you git a holt of ther gal?"

"Yes."

"Any inducements? It's risky, you know."

"I will pay you well."

"Thet's ernuff. You hev allus kep' yer word with me. I'm with ye."

"I knew I could depend on you."

"How many men will you take with us? We may git inter a mighty snug corner in Jacktown."

"Not a man. I have friends in that camp whom I can depend on. For instance, there is Dandy Dirk."

"An' er mighty good man he is too," asserted the wrestler. "Are there enny more like him?"

"There are others, but none of them are the equals of Dirk. We don't need any from this half-drunken crowd of cowards."

"All right, you knows best. W'en shell we turn back?"

"Now; but we will not enter Jacktown until after dark. We can lay low near the place and wait till night. It might not be healthy for us if we were recognized by some of Jacktown's citizens; and besides that we may do work that we will not care to have laid at our door."

Watching their opportunity, the two plotters turned aside from the trail when no one was noticing and allowed the crowd to go on without them. Then they turned their horses' heads back toward Jacktown.

"Now for Laughing Lu and revenge," said the Jasper City sport, grimly.

Reaching a point near Jacktown, they concealed their horses and stole forward till from a high bluff they could command a view of the victorious camp. There they remained, conversing in low tones, laying plots and plans, till darkness fell. When they finally stole forward into the place, they noted that the camp was brilliantly lighted, and it seemed that the citizens were greatly excited. Just as they reached the eastern boundary of the town a burst of music, a wild cheer and a thunderous report saluted their ears.

"Great Moses!" gasped Hickory Jimmy, in alarm. "What's that?"

"The Jacktownites are probably celebrating their victory," Harry explained. "Come on, we are on hand to witness the fun."

CHAPTER V.

THE WORK OF A NIGHT.

HIGH CARD HARRY and Hickory Jimmy witnessed the reception given the party returning from the successful pursuit of the kidnappers of Ione Wilson. Mingling with the excited crowd, the Jasper City desperadoes attracted no attention and were enabled to see everything that occurred. When Violet Vane appeared on the platform in front of the Silver Bell Hotel and made a speech after being presented by Judge Blowbugle, the vindictive wrestler involuntarily reached for a revolver, but his companion's hand restrained him.

"Slow and easy, pard," came firmly from the card-sharp's lips. "This is not the time for that. You would hang higher than Haman if you dropped him now. He is the idol of this camp, and the men of Jacktown will visit a speedy vengeance on the one who harms him—providing they know who does the job."

Hickory Jimmy relinquished his evil purpose with a sigh of regret. It was hard for him to restrain his passion, but he knew that Harry had spoken the truth.

"It must be done silently and swiftly," hissed the card-player, softly. "No open work. Have a care if you wish to leave Jacktown alive."

It was some time later that the two learned of Dandy Dirk's arrest.

"He must be rescued," declared Harry, with some excitement. "You must help me, pard, and that must be our first work. After Dirk is free we can look after the girl. The girl—by Jove! there are two of them, and both are handsome. One is Violet Vane's sister and the other his sweetheart. If we kidnap them both, we shall be striking a heavy blow at the velvet dandy."

"But won't it be er mighty hard job ter do?"

"The chances are that it will; but we can work it with some aid, and I fancy I have struck the very man to help us. He has a room in the Silver Bell and will admit us. We can make a go of it."

"And if we fail ter kill Violet Vane, we will have him hot at our heels to-morrow."

"Just what we want, for then we can lead him into a death-trap. Savvy?"

"Yes, but it's goin' ter be mighty dangerous."

"You are right. Any games against that little deception in velvet will be dangerous. Are you afraid of him?"

"Not by er durned sight!"

"All right; that settles it."

High Card Harry was busy from that time onward. He laid his plans well, taking care that in no way should he meet with defeat. As the night wore on and the carousal continued he became nervous and fearful lest he should not have an opportunity to carry out his schemes.

He had managed to let Dandy Dirk know that he was near and waiting for a chance to effect his rescue, and he knew that the prisoner would be ready for anything that might occur.

The room next to the one in which the unsuspecting girls were to spend the night was occupied by the ally of whom the card-sharp had spoken to Hickory Jimmy. But instead of waiting till things were quiet and admitting the two plotters, it was decided that they should secretly enter his room and remain there till the time for work arrived.

High Card Harry had once been an actor and was able to successfully imitate the voice of almost any person whom he had ever heard speak, providing he had taken particular notice of their manner of speech. The sport from Jasper resolved to try to make use of this ability in rescuing the prisoner.

The hour for action finally came. High Card and the wrestler crept from the room into the corridor. Quietly and with a steady tread the gambler advanced along the corridor, and with the step of a cat, a revolver in either hand, Hickory Jimmy followed. Before the door of the room in which Dandy Dirk was confined, guarded by the detective, Harry halted. Then he rapped boldly on the door. There was a stir within and a voice—that of the officer—asked:

"Who is there?"

For answer, the card-sharp rapped again in a peculiar manner, at the same time saying:

"It is I—Violet Vane."

And his voice sounded exactly like that of the Velvet Sport. It was a perfect imitation.

His second knock had been a signal to Dandy Dirk, and the gambler knew that the prisoner would be all ready for desperate action. But it was evident that the detective's suspicions were easily aroused, for he advanced to the door and again demanded:

"Who is there?"

Harry replied in the same tone of voice used before:

"Violet Vane."

"What do you want?"

"To talk with the prisoner a few moments. Five minutes is all I ask."

After a few moments more of hesitation, the cunning mimic heard the key turn in the lock and braced himself for a spring, intending to launch himself straight at Alan Dale's throat. But as the door swung open, the gambler saw Dandy Dirk strike the detective on the back of the head with the iron manacles which held his wrists together and Harry was just in time to catch the body of the unlucky man in his arms.

The detective had been stricken senseless—perhaps killed.

"Slickly done!" laughed High Card Harry, softly, as he bore the unconscious man to the little bed in the room. "I knew that you would be ready to act, but I hardly thought you would have a chance to do such effective work as this. Here, I will place my coat under his head to keep the blood from smearing the clothes. He is not bleeding very profusely. We do not want to leave any signs of a struggle if it can be avoided."

"Right you are," agreed Dandy. "It would please me to make people believe that it was all a put-up job between me and the sharp here. If there are no signs of a struggle, I can do that, for I will leave a little note behind which will prove anything but a balm to their souls."

Swiftly Harry and the wrestler bound and gagged the unconscious man, then the key to the manacles was found and Dandy was released.

"Gods!" he exclaimed. "It seems good to get out of those cursed things. I was in what you might call a mighty tight box, and when I forget this service I shall be unable to remember anything."

"That is all right. I only did for you what you would have done for me had I been in the same fix. But there is more work for us to do and the quicker we get at it the better."

"I am with you in anything, and perhaps I may be able to assist you materially. Just tell me your plans."

The door was closed and in a short space of time the Jasper City sport had made Dirk acquainted with his plans.

"Good!" exclaimed the liberated scoundrel. "I have taken a fancy to Owen Wilson's daughter and have registered an oath to gain possession of her. You may have Laughing Lu; I will take the peerless Ione."

"The arrangement satisfies me."

"And, as you say, we will be striking straight at that cursed velvet fop when we carry away his sister and his sweetheart. We can take the girls to some safe place amid the mountains,

and lure Violet Vane into Jasper City by making him believe that they have been carried there. In Jasper we can easily find a way to down the man whom the toughs of the place must cordially hate after the work of yesterday."

"Solid hoss sense. If we can get away with the girls, Mr. Vane is as good as done for."

"We will get to work at once. First let me write a few words, then we will carry this bound of justice out by the back way. I have keys which will take us anywhere in this old building."

In a few moments Dandy had written and posted the note which Violet Vane afterward found pinned to the door by a tiny dagger. Then they lifted the still unconscious detective, and with his head wrapped in Harry's coat to prevent leaving a trail of blood, carried him from the Silver Bell. The Jasper City sport had made arrangements for horses to carry them all away from Jacktown, but Dandy secured one more to carry the detective, who was bound upon the animal's back. Then leaving Hickory Jimmy and the man who had served them by secreting the Jasperites in his room, High Card Harry and Dandy Dirk once more stole into the Silver Bell to complete their vile work.

In less than half an hour they issued forth, carrying two unconscious forms in their arms. Dandy's keys, a little chloroform and a great deal of cat-like cunning, had enabled them to secure the unfortunate maidens without arousing a soul within the house.

Behind them they had left the writing which they hoped would lead Violet Vane to Jasper City—into the lion's jaws—to death!

Hidden by the darkness, they rode out of town and away into the mountain fastnesses, leading the horse upon whose back was bound the silent detective.

For nearly two hours they rode onward through the dark passes. Finally High Card Harry fell back to see if there was still no sign of life in the detective's body.

Then he made an amazing discovery.

The led horse was burdenless—the detective was gone!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SITUATION IN JASPER CITY.

THE defeated toughs upon returning from Jacktown had indeed "taken" Jasper City. The unexpected result of their raid had aroused all the ugliness in their natures, and they proceeded to vent their spite on their own town. Had High Card Harry been with them when they reached Jasper, such a thing would not have occurred, for the cool-headed card-sharp would have seen that a struggle that might be disastrous to the toughs would surely follow if they attempted to hold the place. But the gambler was not on hand to restrain them, and within thirty minutes after charging down the main street of the place they had the majority of the law-abiding citizens under cover and everything in their hands.

Then began a genuine reign of terror in Jasper City. Up and down the streets of the boomers' camp rode the liquor-maddened mob, yelling like Indian warriors and firing their revolvers to the right and left. Two or three of the quiet citizens of the place were wounded, and one man who came out and tried to argue with the ruffians with a shot-gun was dropped in his tracks, the bullet striking a vital spot.

The first place seized by the mob was the Night Hawk Saloon, one of the worst drinking and gambling resorts in the town. The proprietor of the place was fired through a window, and at the muzzles of several revolvers, the bar-keeper was forced to set out liquid refreshments for the gang. Right then and there the mob would have got paralyzed so that the honest citizens of the place would have had little trouble in quelling the riot, but at that juncture a cool-headed and desperate man grasped the reins.

"Whisky may be tempting, pards," said a little man, whose steel-blue eyes seemed to look one through and through, "but you are displaying mighty poor judgment in turning down so much of the stuff. Hadn't you better let up?"

A dozen men wheeled, with their hands resting on their revolvers, but their fingers never closed to draw the weapons, for they recognized the one who had spoken.

"Saul the Spotter!"

The exclamation came from the lips of two-thirds of the inmates of the saloon. They knew the small man with the steel-blue eyes. Saul

Spot, called "Saul, the Spotter," was the crack pistol-shot of the camp. He never missed, and it was said that he could draw and shoot while most men were reaching for their guns. He was a dangerous man to tackle, as his own private graveyard in Jacktown would testify. He was a very peculiar man, for he never drank a drop of liquor, never avoided a quarrel, and sometimes picked a fuss for the mere satisfaction of having some one to shoot. He had enemies enough, but they were careful not to let him discover that they were his enemies. A man who carried his life in his hand, although he did not drink, he was classed with the toughs of Jasper City.

And now as he stood within the Night Hawk Saloon, his arms folded, leaning lazily against a post, he looked like the meekest and most inoffensive of men. But the gang around the Spotter knew him quite well, and their hands fell away from their weapons as they uttered his name. No change came over his immobile features to indicate that he noticed the sudden change, but his keen eyes took it all in just the same. Slowly he repeated:

"Don't you think you had better let up?"

"What do you mean?" asked several.

"Just what I said. You are displaying mighty poor judgment in filling yourselves with liquor in this manner. If you do not all want to be fired out of town before another day, you will chain up a little."

"How is that?"

"Plain as the nose on a man's face. You have made fools of yourselves to begin with in raiding this town in this way, but now that you have taken it, you must hold it or be fired. Where in the name of the prophets is High Card Harry?"

"Dunno. He left us on the way back from Jacktown."

"That was smart! I always counted him a man of good judgment, although I did not exactly approve of the raid on Jacktown and he did. He should have staid by you and saw that you broke up and hunted your holes when you got back here. I know that he would not have countenanced this wild raid."

"W'at's that got ter do with our drinkin'?"

"Hello! So you are there, Toddy Tom. I might know that you would be around when free whisky was running. You don't know enough to reason about this matter, but that the others may understand, I will say that as sure as the crowd get paralyzed to-night the Sunday school people of this camp will rise up and overpower you when you are unable to resist. What does that mean?"

The Spotter paused a moment, but no one answered the question.

"I will tell you what it means," he said, slowly and distinctly. "It means Judge Lynch!"

There was something terribly blood-chilling about those four words, and more than one lawless fellow trembled and rubbed his throat as he heard them. After several moments of impressive silence, Saul continued:

"You all know that for some time Jasper has been threatening a general clean-out of the gamblers and bums, and your judgment should tell you that that clean-out will come now if the goody-good men can make it work. You have seized the town and you must hold it or go."

"An' er leetle whisk' is jest the stuff ter give us ther backbone ter hole it," asserted Toddy Tom.

"And too much whisk' is weakening for that same backbone. If you could get the stuff, you would drink till you was blind drunk, even if you knew that the blamed p'isen would kill you. You take a reef in your mouth and let us hear less of you. I would be doing the community a good turn if I loaded your old carcass down with lead, and I may be tempted to do so if you put in any more of your lip."

That was enough for the bummer. Swiftly he slunk out of sight behind those who were gathered around the pistol prince, and nothing further was heard from him.

The Spotter went on:

"You men of brains can see the common sense in what I have said. If you fill up with liquor, there will be an uprising in this camp and somebody will be hanged for dropping old Solomon Drew, who attempted to hold the town with a shot-gun. If there are serious charges against any others of the gang, he may have company. The rest of the crowd will be escorted to the outskirts of the place and given a certain space of time in which to make themselves invisible. If they return, the penalty will be a piece of hemp. How like you the prospect, pards?"

There was a dead silence, then some one answered:

"'Tain't very invitin'."

Saul smiled, grimly.

"There is only one way to prevent this clean-out, and that is to hold the camp. Do you think that a gang of drunken men can do that?"

"It's pritty doubtful."

"Right you are. Now, pards, you have your choice. What will you have?"

"W'at d'yer want us ter do, Saul?"

"Let up on liquor and hold the town. I will help you."

"An' you're as good as fifty common men," declared an enthusiastic admirer.

"Er durned sight better," shouted another.

The gang needed a leader and they all knew that in the absence of High Card Harry the Spotter was the very one for the place, therefore they were ready to listen to him almost to a man. And those who did not wish to listen did not dare to say so. Saul readily perceived that he could carry things as he liked.

"Pards," he said, quietly, "I propose that we turn this saloon into the hands of its rightful owner. Whatever liquor comes over the bar after this will be paid for, and for to-night the bar will be closed. I shall order the other saloons closed until to-morrow. Who kicks against that?"

The Spotter's hands were in the side-pockets of his coat—and no one kicked.

"That settles it," declared Saul, and for the remainder of that night the toughs found it very difficult to obtain liquor in Jasper City.

Where was Solid Sid, the marshal, all this time? Nobody seemed able to answer the question. Sid was known as a mighty bad man, and the peaceable citizens of the town had expected that he would soon quell the riot. But the solid man failed to show up, and the toughs had everything their own way. There seemed to be a screw loose somewhere, to speak figuratively.

It was near morning when there were three new-comers in the place. Two of them were well-known, for they were High Card Harry and Hickory Jimmy. The third was the Jacktown gambler and desperado, Tom Alicar, or Dandy Dirk.

Harry's appearance was hailed with delight by the toughs, of whom he was the acknowledged leader. The Spotter at once stepped into the ranks, and the card-sharp assumed command. But he depended on Saul to explain the situation, which the pistol expert did in a very lucid manner. For a time the gambler seemed to hesitate between dismay and delight, but finally a grim look settled on his face, and he said:

"There is no backing out now. We must hold the town and rule it from this time onward. This difficulty was needless, but there is no use in crying over spilled milk. We had quite a grip on the place before, and could have held our own had the cits tried to get rid of us, but now we must get everything into our hands and cling fast."

Morning came, and at Harry's direction the Night Hawk Saloon was opened again, although the card-sharp warned his men to go light and pay for all they drank. Thus far the law-abiding citizens of the place had made no organized attempt to regain control of the camp, but the toughs were looking for such a move at any time.

The forenoon passed without a pitched battle, although there were several little skirmishes in which no one was seriously injured. Near midday a delegation from the peaceable citizens of the place appeared in the Night Hawk Saloon.

"We wish to see the leader of the party that is raising such a riot in this place," declared the spokesman of the delegation.

High Card Harry promptly stepped forward.

"Reckon I must be the man you are looking for," he admitted. "I am the leader of the party that has taken possession of this place, and by common consent the Alcalde of Jasper City."

"Now hole a leetle on there!" cried a voice from the doorway. "I reckon ye're troddin' on my corns w'en ye make that kind o' tork. I heard that this hyer town wuz needin' o' er alcade ter kine o' yank ther knots out o' things an' bring 'em roun' ship-shape, so I jest hoofed it all ther way frum Jacktown hyer ter present myself fer ther orafice. Ef ye're lookin' fer er galoot fer do thet same, I'm ther very galoot ye're lookin' fer. I propose ter becum ther Alcalde o' Jasper, an' my name's Wagg, with Erastus ther ther frunt. Whoopee!"

And straight into the saloon tripped the woolly-headed man, hat in hand, bowing to the right and left and grinning all over his homely, beardless face.

CHAPTER VII.

ERASTUS GETS INTO TROUBLE.

THE ragged vagabond of the mines was on hand as usual and was anxious to get into the midst of the excitement. Apparently without a thought of danger, he boldly entered the Night Hawk Saloon and proclaimed himself a candidate for the office of Alcalde of Jasper City. It is doubtful if Erastus knew just what an alcalde was, but he was certain that it was some exalted position else High Card Harry would not care to represent himself as holding the place by common consent of the people; and it is positively certain that the tramp did not pause to take a second thought before he announced that he was a candidate for the office. The woolly-headed man usually talked first and thought afterward.

Wagg's appearance and loudly-spoken announcement caused a ripple of excitement within the saloon, and more than one man allowed his hands to creep toward his revolvers. Everything seemed to indicate that there would be lively times directly, and if appearances were not very deceptive, the vagrant from Jacktown would find himself in warm company. While the toughs were smarting from their recent repulsion in Paradise Gulch, it was a bold thing for any man to appear in their midst and boldly declare that he was just from Jacktown; but the camp tramp put himself in double danger by announcing himself as alcalde in opposition to the card-sharp chief of the lawless gang.

But what cared Erastus? He smiled as serenely as if in the midst of friends and advanced into the room without the least hesitation. The woolly-headed man was a strange combination of bravery, braggadocio and cowardice, and it was impossible to tell, when he was forced to do one or the other, whether he would fight or run. He would do either at the most unexpected moments.

Pausing in the middle of the floor, he fanned the air with his long arms as if they were a pair of wings and uttered a very creditable imitation of the hoarse crow of a Brahma rooster.

"Hyar I be," he loudly announced, "ther fine-feathered, high-steppin', loud crowin' cock-a-doodle-do from Jacktown. Jest feastyer bleared optics enter me an' see 'f ye kin realize yer own utter insignificance. Common critters hunt their holes an' prepare fer Gabriel w'en I let off steam in a good-sized ole-fashioned yoop. They think that it's ther las' triumph an' thet ther final day o' deestruction hes cum. I'm a leather-lunged howler frum Hurrucane Gap, I am. I'm er mighty b-a-a-d man ter tackle an' er hard hawse ter crowd. Whoopee! Trot out yer heavy-hitters an' see me interjuce 'em ter one o' them ancient s'prise partys w'at ole Samson use ter kerry concealed in ther sleeves o' his everyday ulsterett. If ye want ter see fun—fun—haydoogins o' it—jest give me er chance ter spread."

He paused a moment to catch his breath and to glare around in a manner that was both defiant and beseeching. It was a wonder that half a dozen of the fighters in the crowd did not make a jump for him without further ceremony, but something seemed to hold them all motionless till the vagabond began again.

"Hev I took ther place without er struggle?" he asked. "By jehocus! it looks thet way. I did think thar wuz er leetle sand in this ole town, but I reckon I must 'a' bin woefully deceived. They sed thar wuz sum mighty good men in Jasper an' thet if er feller wuz lookin' fer invigoratin' exercise he c'd fine it hyer without hafe tryin'. Reckon thet must 'a' bin an error. I didn't expec' ter becum' Alcalde o' Jasper without hevin' ter rassil fer ther posish, but it looks as if I had slid right inter ther place ez easy ez grease. Dinged if I don't admire ther jedgmint o' ther gang, though I can't say thet I think much o' ther pluck. Gentlemen, allow me ter interjuce myself: E. Wagg, Esq., Alcalde o' Jasper City."

And once more he bowed to the right and left, hat in hand. The crowd looked curiously at High Card Harry to see what the card-sharp would do or say. Harry was regarding the loud-spoken vagrant with a look of mild annoyance on his dark, handsome face. Still the Jasper City sport did not seem very angry. It was apparent that he was more disgusted and annoyed than anything else. The crowd waited for him to make some kind of a move. Wagg pretended to accept their hesitation as an evidence of fear.

"Tails down ther hull o' 'em," he laughed. "Score one fer Erastus! Oh! I'm ther high-howler w'at makes them hunt their holes! I'm ther—"

"Stop!"

It was High Card Harry who spoke, and his

sharp command caused the tramp to pause with his mouth wide open, the picture of sudden surprise.

"Eh! did you speak?" gasped Erastus.

"I did."

"Waal, waal! Thet's most s'prisin'! I didn't s'pose no one dared open their clam-traps. W'at 'd yer say?"

"I said stop, which literally means chain up. You are using your mouth altogether too freely."

"Sho! Is thet so?"

"You are apt to discover that it is. You have evidently been drinking or you would not dare to come in here and fire off your mouth in this way. I advise you to go somewhere and snooze it off. If you want any fun—fun—come back when you are sober and get your stomach full. Now slide."

But Erastus did not slide.

"Oh, no!" he grinned. "Excuse me if I pause a while. You are 'way off if you think that I am drunk. It takes quite a lot o' ther stuff ter git Ole Wooltop fuddled, an' I'll sw'ar thet atween us, Jedge Blowbugle o' Jacktown, and I, only surrounded one small gallon las' nite. We both went light, though ther jedge c'u'dn't see quite as well as usual this mornin' an' his pins was a leetle shaky. But I'm all right, bet yer boots!"

Then the woolly-headed man took a double-shuffle to convince every one that his legs were all right. Gradually the scowl on High Card's face grew more ominous.

"If you will wait till I attend to business with these gentlemen," said the gambler, "I will see what can be done for you, my friend."

"Oh, cert," nodded Wagg, gravely. "I'm no hog ter want ter take yer 'tention all ther time. Jest go ahead with yer tooth-pullin' while I 'muse ther congregation."

A word from the card-sharp warned the crowd not to "jump" the vagrant till he should give them permission, and then he turned to hear what the delegation from the peaceable citizens had to propose. Wagg promptly made his way to the bar and called for a "bracer."

"I would like to see the color of your change before I set out the moisture," said the cautious bartender.

"Hain't my credic good?" asked the tramp, appearing somewhat surprised.

"Yes, good for nothing."

"Is thet so? An' I ther Alcalde o' Jasper! Waal, waal! Reckon I'll hev ter pay spot cash then," and his hand slowly descended into the capacious pocket of his ragged pantaloons.

"Wonder whar my puss is?" he muttered, as he slowly felt around in all of his pockets. "I don't seem ter fine it, an' it orter be hyer. Guess I must 'a' drapped it. Oh, well! I don't mind, fer it only contained a couple or three hundred. Guess I won't drink now; I hain't hafe ser dry as I wuz."

Then Erastus turned his back to the bar, and for five minutes his tongue ran without stopping. No one tried to interrupt him, for they did not care to put their fingers into High Card Harry's soup, and every one felt that the card-sharp had something in store for the tramp from Jacktown. In one corner Harry was talking earnestly with the delegation, evidently discussing the situation.

"I hev taken er contrac' ter 'muse the congregashun," observed the woolly-headed man, "an' I'm goin' ter do my best ter do so. P'raps you folks don't know thet I'm er poic?"

No answer.

"I thort likely," he nodded. "Waal, I be. I'll sing ye a leetle song w'at I composed as I was cumin' frum Jacktown. Jest lissen."

And without further ado, he began to roar at the top of his voice:

"Cum lissen to my ditty,
I'll sing it soft an' low,—
There dwells in Jasper City
A gallant sport you know;
He's tall an' straight—ther dandy!
His eyes are dark an' keen,
An' with ther keerd he's handy,
W'en he strikes er chap thet's green.

"Ter Jacktown came this daisy
An' er gang ter take ther town;
Begobs! it wassent aisy
W'en 'Rastus wuz aroun'!
He tried er leetle poker—
It is his fav'rite game—
He met his match—ther joker
Thet we call Violet Vane."

Every one within the room knew that this was a direct thrust at High Card Harry, and more than one expected to see the card-sharp drop the reckless vagrant in his tracks; but the gambler seemed to pay no attention to the woolly-

headed man or his song. Quietly he continued his talk with the representatives of the law-abiding people of the town.

Finally the interview ended, the delegation left the saloon and High Card Harry turned toward the bar. There was a slight stir, for every one expected trouble at once. The tramp was the only one who did not seem to notice Harry's approach.

"Yes," Erastus was saying, "I hev kinder made up my mine ter becum alcalde o' this hyer town. I understan' thet thar is er leetle trubble hyer 'bout suthin'. If thet's er fack, I'm jest ther lad ter straighten things out. I kin do it in er leetle o' no time, an' I'll ergree ter hev this runnin' as it orter be afore twenty-four hours."

"And I will give you just twenty-four seconds to get out of that door," observed High Card Harry, quietly, drawing a gold watch from his pocket and glancing at the face of it. "If you are not gone in that time, I will have you fired."

Mr. Wagg gave vent to a whistle of astonishment.

"Now you don't mean thet," he asserted—"you can't! There is apt ter be fun in this ranch afore I am fired."

The card-sharp said not a word until the twenty-four seconds were up, then he turned to Hickory Jimmy, who was standing near:

"Fire him, Jimmy."

The wrestler grinned and spit on his hands.

"Bet yer life I will," he chuckled, savagely, as he began to advance toward the intended victim.

"Bet yer life you won't!" came promptly from the vagrant's lips, as his long-barreled revolvers appeared in his hands. "I am a mighty hard man ter fire w'en I hold ther drop. Jest chain up or chaw lead!"

And it was plain that Wagg meant business, therefore Hickory Jim paused irresolutely.

"I'm no rassiler," admitted the woolly-headed man, as he leaned lazily back with his elbows on the bar, the rusty-looking revolvers being pointed to the front. "I thort I wuz yesterday, but I got holt o' this same galoot an' mighty soon changed my mine. My back hain't got over achin' yet. He guv me ther all-durnedest flam I never got. No, thank you, I don't keer fer enny more in mine. I know w'en I've got ernuff o' er good thing."

The wrestler looked toward High Card Harry for instructions. The gambler scowled, an evil gleam in his eyes.

"I will give you one more chance," said the dark-faced sport. "You may leave this room unmolested now. If you appear again, you will be shot on sight. If you do not go peaceably, you shall be thrown out."

"An' w'u'd ye throw me revolvers an' all?" inquired Wagg, blandly.

"Yes, through that window to your right."

"All right, throw away! Jasper City will hev sevarial funerals ter-morrer, I reckon. Su'thin' ginerally draps w'en one o' these anti-mortem pill-dispensers an' system-perforators kersplodes. Wade in, sinners!"

Just then Erastus felt something cold just back of his right ear. It was the muzzle of a revolver held in the hand of the bartender, who commanded:

"Drop them revolvers! If you don't I'll blow the whole roof of your cabeza off!"

Wagg suddenly grew pale.

"Hole on! hole on!" he spluttered. "I cave! I'm reddy ter git out now. I don't believe I want ter run fer office ennyhow. Fact is, I w'u'dn't be alcalde o' this ole camp if I c'u'd jest ez well ez not."

"Disarm him," ordered Harry, coldly.

Two men sprung forward to obey.

"Tain't no fair," whined the trembling vagrant. "This cotchin' er man frum behind is low dirt. I reckon I stubbed inter ther wrong place, and I'm willin' ter depart quietly now. This hyer gittin' mixed up in pollerticks an' runnin' fer office is danger'us business."

Wagg's long revolvers were taken from him and laid on the bar. Then the two men looked to Harry for further instructions.

"Fire him through the window," was the grim command.

They seized the woolly-headed man, and were about to obey, when a clear, ringing voice cried:

"Hold a little on there! What's all this row about, anyway?"

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER CANDIDATE FOR OFFICE.

THE speaker was a new-comer in the saloon, and a stranger in town. He was a rather undersized man, and was dressed in a seedy-looking suit of faded black. His rather florid face

was made to look doubly florid, as his stubby whiskers were fiery red. A mass of reddish hair formed a "fringe" entirely around the lower extremity of the battered silk hat that was set upon the back of his head. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his pantaloons, and a half-smoked cigar, held in one corner of his mouth, gave him a rakish air. But his eyes were dark and keen, and his voice had sounded clear and distinct, despite the cigar, causing the men who were about to throw Erastus through the open window to pause and look around.

"What's all this row about anyway?" repeated the seedy stranger, blowing out a cloud of cigar-smoke. "I would like to inquire what our friend of the shaggy head has done that he should be so rudely ejected through yon yawning window."

Cool as an icicle was the red-haired individual as he leaned lazily against a post near the center of the room, and allowed his keen eyes to pass swiftly and searchingly over the throng. Although he appeared anything but dangerous, there was something about his careless manner that caused the card-sharp's satellites to pause and hesitate ere carrying out the orders of their leader.

High Card Harry wheeled with an oath, revolver in hand.

"Who in blazes are you?" he demanded, savagely.

"Well, now, partner, I don't know as that is any of your business," was the calm reply. "But for all of that, I don't mind swapping handles, to speak figuratively. Who in blazes are you?"

The scowl on the gambler's face grew still blacker. He did not fancy the stranger's cool, impudent manner.

"You are either a fool or a lunatic," declared the angry sport.

"Possibly you are right," admitted the red head, soberly. "I've been told that same thing before, but I notice that I most always manage to rustle around and hold up my end with the rest of the boys. I must say that if I am either a fool or a lunatic, I am about the smartest one that I know of."

The gambler laughed sneeringly.

"You are altogether too smart," he asserted.

"You had best have a care, or you will wish you had not thrust your nose into High Card Harry's business."

"Thanks, awfully! I am so glad you mentioned it. So your handle is High Card Harry? A gentleman who sometimes feels of the papers, I should infer. In other words, a shark who makes food of the foolish little fishes which come in his way. I wonder if some of the little fishes ever turn out to be full-grown whales."

At which the woolly-headed man snickered. "Jeehocus!" he grinned. "Now you've hit it, pard. He run plum ergin' er whale w'en he tackled Violet Vane at Jacktown. Sweet Violets is small, but—oh, my!"

The stranger smiled knowingly as he blew out another cloud of smoke.

"It oftentimes happens thus. The mouse sometimes proves to be a tiger with claws worse than Damascus blades. Now I am a sport myself, and I must admit that I have been there many a time. Some of you people may have taken me for a millionaire in disguise. I am not. I am no grasping monopolist. I am no Jay Gould. I am simply one of the bloods, deucedly down on my luck. I heard that this town was off its trucks and needed some one to yank things into running order, so I jst slid in here to present myself as a candidate for the office of alcalde."

The camp tramp gave a whoop of delight.

"Great jeeswax!" he bellowed. "Ernuther one inter ther ring! This hyer's gittin' kinder interestin', I swow! Stranger, w'at is your name?"

The seedy individual removed his left hand from his pocket long enough to doff his battered high hat, as he answered:

"Most honorable sir of the shaggy caput, my baptismal handle is Coolan Casey, a peculiar name I think you will admit. Out in this land of rustlers, however, they have altered the title somewhat and call me a Cool Case. I have been told that the abbreviated cognomen suits me to a full-grown capital T, as all who know me say I am indeed a very Cool Case."

High Card Harry gave vent to an oath of disgust.

"You are too fresh for killing," he asserted, contemptuously. "You had better take a back seat and witness the performance from a safe distance, for something may fall on you and hurt you if you get too near."

"Thanks again, dear sir. You mean well enough, but it is very plain that you have not sprouted your last wisdom tooth yet. There is lots in this world for you to learn if you try. This brings me round to my original question. What has the gentleman of the dilapidated attire and lamb-like topknot done that he should be so rudely ejected?"

Wagg hastened to reply:

"Northin' at all, pard, only jest announced meself as a candidate fer ther orafice o' Alcalde o' Jasper. This hyer High Keerd Hurrah says thet he is ther alcalde, an' so he wuz goin' ter hev me fired."

The Cool Case buried his hands still deeper in his pockets and surveyed the Jasper City sport in a quizzical way.

"And who is this high horse that attempts to run this town?" he inquired, a touch of contempt in face and voice.

"I am the Alcalde of Jasper City," answered Harry, hotly.

"Naow is that so?" drawled the red-head.

"You quite surprise me! How long have you held the office, may I inquire?"

"You may inquire and be hanged!" snapped the furious sport. "I am not answering questions for every bummer who strikes the place."

"Quite right, dear sir—quite right. But it is always best to answer a gentleman. I fancy that you do not answer because you cannot. You are no more the Alcalde of Jasper than I am, and neither of us will rightfully obtain that position till we do so by a vote of the people. Now I present myself as a candidate for the office, and until I am defeated at the polls or some other fatal spot, I intend to make a strong fight for my rights. Please jot that down in your memorandum so that you may not forget it."

"Bah!" sneered the gambler. "You are making a fool of yourself. You can no more obtain the office in opposition to me than you can creep into heaven."

"A place where one could waste ten thousand years in a vain search for you, my friend," smiled Case. "But let that drop and come around to the business in hand. Why is it that I stand no show at all in opposition to you?"

"That question shows your utter ignorance. Do you observe these men around you?"

"Dear sir, do you fancy that I am blind or asleep?"

The gambler ignored the question as he continued:

"Every one of these men are friends of mine and they are all heeled. A word—a look from me and down you go, full of lead."

Case surveyed the crowd critically.

"Quite a select gang of cut-throats," he finally observed. "And are they really all tools of yours, my friend?"

An ominous murmur came from the gang, and half a score of hands crept toward concealed weapons. They did not fancy the stranger's plain talk.

The peculiar little man noticed the alarming aspect of the crowd, but he did not appear startled in the least. Calmly he blew out a thin column of smoke, and with one roll of his tongue, shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. High Card seemed to hesitate about something.

"What is it, sir?" asked Case. "Are you thinking of pulling the string and letting the animals loose? Perhaps you had better consider it a little longer. I have no desire to wipe out the entire gang, beginning with you. I have simply come here to present myself as a candidate for the office of alcalde, and if elected, to yank things into running shape. I have wiped out entire battalions of toughs before now, but it is a very unpleasant job—very!"

"Whoopee!" cried Erastus. "If I kin git holt o' my resolvers, I'll help ye, pard. I reckon we kin clean out this place an' capter ther town. I'm er mighty b-a-a-d man w'en I git started, an' don't ye fergit it."

High Card Harry uttered a snarl and wheeled toward the men who were still holding fast to Wagg.

"Fire the fool out of the window!" shouted the card-sharp. "Then we will attend to this galoot."

"Stop!" came crisply from Cool Case's lips. "Release that man or suffer the consequences!"

The men hesitated.

"Throw him out, you fools!" roared Harry.

"What are you hesitating for?"

But just then something quite unexpected occurred. Erastus seemed to suddenly become very much alive. With a sudden movement, he knocked the feet from under both of the men who held him, letting them fall to the floor.

Then, one after the other, he seized them by a convenient part of their clothes and hurled them through the window!

For a few moments the entire crowd appeared dumfounded. Wagg improved the time in securing his revolvers. Then High Card Harry cried, furious with rage:

"A thousand furies! Jump him, lads! Down him in his tracks!"

But louder and clearer than before rung Cool Case's voice:

"Chain up or chew lead! I always shoot to kill, and High Card Harry is the first man to drop!"

His hands had left his pockets and both of them held revolvers of the latest and most improved pattern. The careless stranger had suddenly resolved into a very dangerous-appearing individual, and the card-sharp observed that one of Case's revolvers had him "lined."

"Call off your dogs!" commanded the red-headed man—"call them off, I say! The first shot means death to you!"

The gambler hesitated, but there was something in the black eyes of the little man that cased him to fling up one hand with the order:

"Hold a moment, pards! Don't shoot till I tell you to. We will avoid bloodshed, if possible."

"Many thanks," smiled the Cool Case. "I thought you would not be so very rash, for if you are any like me, you have no desire to shuffle off this mortal coil yet awhile. Life is sweet to us all, and it would be a shame to cut you down in the flower of your manhood."

"Curse you!" gritted the baffled and defied gambler. "You are not yet out of the woods."

Before any further words could be exchanged, there was a sudden hubbub near the door and a man pushed into the room, crying:

"Where is High Card Harry?"

"Here," answered the sport. "What is wanted?"

"The south guard have been taken by surprise and passed by a party from Jacktown."

"When did that occur?"

"Nearly an hour ago."

"Furies! And why was I not notified before?"

"Because the guard was bound hand and foot and gagged. They were discovered less than ten minutes ago."

The card-sharp swore roundly.

"This is a pretty mess!" he snarled. "Did the guard recognize any of the party?"

"Yes, three."

"Who were they?"

"The young fellow who warned Jacktown that we were coming to take the place, Solid Sid and the velvet dandy they call Violet Vane."

"I will look after those gentlemen directly," declared the gambler. "But first I must attend to the case in hand."

But, when he turned toward the spot where he had last seen Erastus Wagg and Cool Case, he discovered that both were gone. The open window told how they had succeeded in so quietly and suddenly making their exit.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTIVE QUEENS.

ALAN DALE, the detective, had made his escape in some remarkable manner. When the Jasper City sport discovered that the led horse was riderless he was both amazed and startled.

"Hey, there, pards, hold on!" he cried. "The deuce is to pay here!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Dandy Dirk.

"Matter enough. That cursed detective has slipped us."

"Impossible!"

"Well, I guess not! He's gone, sure as shooting! Here, Hickory, your hands are empty; see if you can tell how the trick was worked."

The little party halted and Hickory Jimmy sprung off his horse to obey the gambler's command. He examined the riderless horse as well as the darkness would allow and answered directly:

"Not a sign here, old man. I reckon ther cuss must have got his han's loose an' cut hisself clear some way. He is gone, an' so's every trace ov him."

It dawned upon the villains that they had been tricked by the detective.

"I don't understand this," asserted the man from Jacktown. "I hit him a killing belt with those irons, and was afraid that I had cracked his skull. He must have a hard head. I was desperate and did not care how hard I hit. I was striking for liberty."

"Well, it seems that our friend, the detective, has struck for liberty."

"Yes, and he will be on my trail again directly. I shall have to watch out for him."

"Yes, down him on sight and down him for keeps."

"I will do that same, but the blamed hound is mighty sharp in the way of disguises. No one would have imagined that Solomon Snide was a detective. I shall have to keep my eyes peeled or he will close in on me again."

"But there is something that bothers me just now."

"What?"

"How long was the fellow conscious before he escaped?"

"Why does that trouble you?"

"I would like to know how much of our conversation he heard."

"Ah!"

For several moments the perplexed rascals were silent. They all understood that the detective might have heard things that would enable him to make it very uncomfortable for them.

"What if he heard us state where we intend to take the girls?" finally came from High Card Harry's lips.

"He will be able to organize a party and rescue them," answered Dandy, promptly.

"Just that. What shall we do?"

"Do you think we had better take the chances?"

"No: I am in favor of taking them somewhere else."

"But where?"

"That is a difficult question. I know of no other good place. Can you think of any?"

"Not one."

At this point Hickory Jimmy came to their aid.

"I can tell you where ye hed better take 'em," he asserted.

"You can?" exclaimed Harry and Dandy in a breath. "Then fire away."

"Take 'em straight inter Jasper."

"What?" The word was both a question and an exclamation.

"I sed take 'em straight inter Jasper," repeated the wrestler.

"You are crazy!" growled the Jacktown desperado.

"Not by er durned sight. W'at mecks ye think I'm daft?"

"Why the idea of taking them to Jasper City is simply ridiculous!"

"Do ye think so? An' w'y is it?"

"That will be the first place where their friends will look for them."

"An' we will be there ter meck it mighty interestin' fer their fr'en's. Jasper will be too hot to hold ennybuddy frum Jacktown arter this. We kin git ther gals inter ther place afore day-peep an' hide 'em. Then let their fr'ens cum."

"I believe Hickory is right," put in High Card Harry.

"But where can we hide them?" asked Dirk, who was still doubtful about the policy of the move.

"In ther secret cellar under my own wigwam," said the wrestler. "Ther cellar has hid more nor one galoot as was wanted by ther law. It will hold ther gals safe, an' no matter how much they squawk, they won't be heard by no one."

"The very place!" exclaimed Harry. But Dandy Dirk did not arrive at such a sudden conclusion. For several moments he considered the matter, and when he spoke, his mind did not seem fully satisfied.

"Well, if there is nothing better, we will carry them to Jasper. I shall have to trust everything to you, my friends."

"And you will never regret doing so," assured the card-sharp. "You may be sure that I would not wish to carry my prize to Jasper if I thought there was much of a chance for me to lose her if I did."

And so it was settled. The party turned their faces toward Jasper City and entered the place some time before daybreak. Where they expected to find a sleeping camp they discovered one that was very wide awake. At first they were at a loss to comprehend the meaning of the uproar which seemed to be going on, but the quick-witted gambler soon suspected the truth.

"The drunken fools have taken the town!" he exclaimed. "They have threatened to do so more than once, but I have always held them in check; but now they have done it for sure. That means a stiff fight with the Sunday-school men who will try to incite the majority of the citizens to go in for a general clean-out. There is hot work ahead."

They succeeded in entering the town and reaching the secret cellar without being seen.

When the two unfortunate girls recovered consciousness they found themselves in a low, dungeon-like place with walls of stone on every side. They were lying on a hard bed, and a lantern which was suspended from the planking above their heads, gave out a dim light. Ione started up, and seeing Luona by her side, cried:

"Where are we? What has happened?"

But Laughing Lu's reply was a faint moan. She was still in a semi-unconscious state.

"Heavenly Father!" gasped Ione. "How came we in this horrible place? My head is bursting with pain and I can remember nothing."

She pressed her hands to her head, and sat up on the bed staring vacantly at the rocky walls when Luona opened her eyes and sobbed:

"Oh, this is fearful pain! I am so sick—so sick!"

The words seemed to arouse the other girl from the strange lethargy that was upon her, and she bent over the moaning girl, softly calling her name.

"What is it?" asked Lu, in a dazed manner. "Who are you? Oh, I know! You are his sweetheart—my brother's sweetheart! How came you here? How came I here? Where are we?"

"I don't know," answered Ione, dazedly. "I cannot remember."

Suddenly Laughing Lu sat up, crying:

"I remember it all now! We were seized while we slept. I felt strong hands grasp me, but when I tried to cry out, something which gave out a sickening smell was pressed over my mouth and nose. Heavens! I thought they were killing me! Everything grew pitchy black, after which bright lights flashed before my eyes, and I knew no more. And now I find myself here."

"Ah! and now I remember the same things! But where are we?"

The two fair captives looked into each other's face, but failed to find the answer to the question there.

"I think we have been kidnapped by wicked men," declared Lulu. "This place looks like a dungeon, and I know well enough that we are prisoners here."

Her words seemed to deprive Ione of strength, for the poor girl sunk back on the rude bed, covering her face with her hands and bursting into tears. At the sight of her companion's distress, Miss Howard appeared to suddenly become strong and almost cheerful—nearly her usual self.

"Don't cry, Ione," she entreated. "Don't give way to your feelings. Bear up, dear friend."

Between her sobs, the weeping girl replied:

"It is so terrible—just as—as everything had been explained and I was so—so happy. Just as the sun had broken through the black clouds—then came this. Oh, mother in heaven! what will become of us?"

Laughing Lu did her best to soothe the distressed girl, and after a time she succeeded in a measure.

"It may not be so bad as it seems," said the dark-eyed queen. "Remember that we have friends who will leave no stone unturned but will find and rescue us. Be as brave as you can and let's examine our prison."

But Ione's nerves were too unstrung. Lu's last words fell harshly on her ears, and she could only wring her hands and repeat:

"Our prison! our prison! our prison!"

Luona arose and carefully examined the dungeon-like cellar. She found that she could scarcely stand erect in the low, cobwebby place. Beneath her feet was the damp ground, and on every side were stone walls. She put up her hands and pressed against the planks over her head. They were immovable. In one of the walls she found an iron grating, and from the small passage beyond came a draught of fresh air. Nowhere in the walls could she find a door, but near one corner of the cellar she discovered what appeared to be a trap-door in the planking overhead. A trial convinced her that it could not be moved from within the cellar. Finally she went back to the bed.

"Is there no hope?" asked Ione.

"While there is life there is hope," was the brave reply.

Then the two girls lay down on the bed with their arms around each other and talked in low tones for a very long time. Finally Ione fell asleep, and after watching her for a time, Lu also slept. Neither of the captives had seemed to think it worth while to call for help, for they did not believe that their cries would be heard.

They had no way of telling how long they slept, but when they awoke they found a small stand near the bed and on the stand a tray with dishes of food and glasses of water. It had been placed there while they slept. Evidently their captors did not intend to starve them.

The girls did not hesitate long about eating, for they were hungry and thirsty. When they had eaten they felt much better. Then once more they fell to discussing the situation, and so the long dreary hours dragged away. No more food was brought them, for there was enough left the first time to serve for two meals.

It seemed that they had been imprisoned for twenty-four hours at least when they were startled to hear a slight noise near the corner where Luona had discovered the trap-door in the planking. They started up and held their breath while they listened for a repetition of the sound. It came in a few seconds. Some one was trying to open the trap!

Who was it?

They asked themselves the question and seemed to feel that there was but one answer. Their captors were coming to see how the birds were getting along.

After a short time the door opened. A moment later a face appeared, the face of—

Ned Morris!

Both of the girls uttered a cry of amazement and delight, which was echoed by the young man, who sprung down into the cellar.

"Found at last!" burst in joyful accents from his lips.

But, an instant later two forms followed the young man through the trap and two burly ruffians flung themselves upon him.

Then began a desperate struggle in the cellar prison, one man against fearful odds, fighting for more than life.

CHAPTER X.

THE MARSHAL'S PROCLAMATION.

HIGH CARD HARRY for a moment could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes when he discovered that both Erastus Wagg and the Cool Case had disappeared from the room; but the open window told how the feat had been accomplished, and with a fearful oath, revolver in hand, he sprung forward. But a glance out of the window showed him neither of the men he was looking for.

"Curse it all!" he snarled, wheeling on those within the room. "Are you all blind? How came you to stand and allow them to escape before your very eyes?"

No one ventured an answer.

"I care nothing for that rag-muffin of the woolly head," Harry declared; "but I fancy that the other was a desperate foe in disguise. The removal of that beard and wig might have shown a face well known to the most of us, although not a man here ever saw it before yesterday."

There was a moment of silence, then Hickory Jimmy asked:

"What in ther uame ov sin do ye mean, ole man? Who do ye think ther critter was?"

"Can't you guess?" sneered the tricked desperado.

"No, blamed if I kin, unless you mean thet—thet—"

"And that is just what I do mean. I am willing to wager my life that Cool Case is none other than the velvet dandy, Violet Vane!"

A chorus of exclamations burst from the men within the saloon. They had not suspected the little man of the red head of being the Velvet Sport, but now that High Card Harry declared his firm conviction that Case was Vane in disguise they at once accepted that view as being the probable truth.

"I am certain that I am right," declared the card-sharp. "The man who called himself the Cool Case was about Violet Vane's height and build, he had the velvet dandy's eyes if not his voice. But you know a man's voice can be easily disguised. Not one man in a thousand would have dared to come in here and face this entire crowd with High Card Harry at its head; but Violet Vane is an exception. I believe that the little fop dares anything. It will take a mighty good man to get him off his pins."

"Ye're right," nodded Hickory Jimmy; "an' if thar's a man on ther face ov this hyar 'arth as kin do it, you're ther one."

"Thanks for the compliment," smiled the gambler, who seemed to have suddenly regained his usual composure. "It may sound like boasting, but I must say that I reckon you are right. If I don't down Violet Vane, it will be useless

for the whole town of Jasper to make the attempt. He has got to come under."

These words were received with growls of approval by the scowling toughs gathered around. They all felt that they had no cause to love the little sport who had done so much to contribute to their defeat at Jacktown, and there was not one among them who would not have felt a thrill of satisfaction had he seen the Velvet Sport lying dead at his feet. It was indeed a very bad gang which had gathered beneath the roof of the Night Hawk Saloon. High Card smiled again as he noticed the signs of approval from those gathered around.

"Everything is fair in love and war," quoted the crafty gambler. "With that for my motto, I shall undertake to get the best of the little sport from Jacktown by fair means or foul. He will probably join with the goody-good people of this place in the warfare which will, without doubt, be organized against us. He will prove a desperate foe, but I fancy that we can cut him off in the early part of his career. He has been lured to this town for the purpose of making an end to his high horsemanship in these parts, and some of the very ones whom he considers friends are his foes, plotting the best way to destroy him. And I am at the bottom of it all."

With that declaration, Harry ceased speaking, and instantly some one proposed:

"Three cheers fer High Keerd Harry, ther Alcalde o' Jasper!"

Then the room rung with their cries. The gambler bowed his thanks, and when silence was restored, his voice was heard again:

"And now, pards, we will go out and look for our foes from Jacktown. If we find them, we will make it mighty pleasant for them. Jasper City is a warm town, but it is not every day that we suspend business for such a holiday as this. Drink all round at my expense, and then we will capture the street."

And after they had turned down the vile liquor they did go out capture the street. Honest, peaceable men sought the nearest cover when the wild, yelling mob came tearing along the public thoroughfare, the occasional rattle of fire-arms and jingle of broken glass telling that they were bent on mischief. Above other sounds could be heard the voice of High Card Harry crying:

"Where are the men from Jacktown? Where is the velvet dandy, who calls himself Violet Vane? If he is not a cowardly craven he will come out here and meet me on the open street, where I will mighty soon cut his comb and dull his spurs. I am High Card Harry, Alcalde of Jasper City."

But, if the card-sharp's boastful words reached the ears of the Velvet Sport, that individual made no sign. His silence angered the desperado, and louder than ever Harry called:

"Where is he—where does he hide—this mighty chief from Jacktown? He dares not show his head! I fling my challenge in his teeth. If he is a man he will come forth to meet me. He is a cowardly dog who hides in some safe corner. I defy him! I laugh at him! He is a squaw! Let Little Johnny-jump-up show himself if he has the least sand in his craw. In Jacktown they call him a chief; in Jasper we call him a coward."

The gambler more than half-expected that his taunting words would call the little sport into the street where he would have an advantage, for the entire gang, fired by liquor, were looking for Vane, intending to shoot on sight. Had the sport appeared, he would have found fifty foes instead of one. But if Vane heard the gambler's taunting words, he allowed his good judgment to control his actions and remained under cover.

If High Card Harry did not find Violet Vane, he found something else when he returned to the Night Hawk Saloon. Upon the outer door of the saloon was pinned a large sheet of brown paper, upon which was written in a clear, bold hand the following:

"PROCLAMATION.

"We, the undersigned guardians of the peace in Jasper, do hereby proclaim the parties who are causing the riot in this town law-breakers and ruffians who are dangerous to the peace of the community and a disgrace to the place. While such men are allowed to dwell in our midst no peaceable man's life is safe and no honest man can rest assured that his property will not be taken from him. The only way to assure the safety of the law-abiding citizens of Jasper is to get rid of the ruffians and cut-throats in one way or another. This the peaceable citizens have decided to do. A general clean-out of the roughs and toughs which infest our fair city has been decided upon, and we, the undersigned, have been instructed to accomplish this end, therefore we give the following

WARNING.

"The rioters in Jasper, including all the bums, loafers, dead-beats, ruffians, cut-throats and law-breakers in general, will be given until sunset to leave the place. If at that time such parties as are above indicated are still to be found within the limits of Jasper, they shall be generously treated to a dose of Colorado justice administered by Judge Lynch. This is not an empty threat, but is a fair warning. We are backed by all the peaceably-inclined citizens of the town and shall enforce the law with rope and revolver. Take heed, ye evil-doers, and leave the place while there is yet time.

"(Signed,) "SIDNEY SHARON,
"Marshal of Jasper,
"VIOLET VANE,
"Deputy.

The card-sharp read the proclamation and warning aloud to the crowd at his heels. He was listened to with almost breathless interest. When he had finished, he turned to the men around him, asking:

"Well, what do you think of that?"

A low murmur arose, and gradually swelled to a wild yell of fury. When silence had been restored in a measure, High Card Harry cried:

"Here are my compliments to that!"

Then he wheeled, a revolver in each hand, and, a few seconds later, twelve bullets had perforated the proclamation and splintered the door. His example was infectious. Every man in the crowd drew one or more revolvers, and a perfect storm of bullets was poured into the in-offensive sheet of paper, riddling it from top to bottom so that in twenty seconds scarcely a dozen words of the writing were complete.

High Card laughed aloud as he witnessed this little piece of work.

"Your actions speak louder than words, pard," he cried, in a clear tone. "You are not ready to leave Jasper just yet, and you do not propose to be frightened out of the place. The Sunday-school children of the town will have lots of sport ejecting us."

A hoarse growl came from the listeners. Harry continued:

"A great many of us who are now warned to leave the town were induced to come here a short time ago by the flattering prospects which were held out to us by the citizens of this place. They were booming the camp, and wanted us for a purpose. We came and served their purpose, and now they want to get shut of us. Hadn't we better go without kicking? Hadn't we better sneak out of the place that we were enticed into? Hadn't we better steal away like a pack of whipped dogs?"

Saul the Spotter stepped forward.

"Any one can take a sneak that wants to," he said, calmly; "but I am going to stop right here, if I have to stay alone and fight the whole town."

And every one there knew that the pistol dead-shot was a man who never broke his word.

"An' I'm stayin' with ye," came from Hickory Jimmy, as that worthy also stepped forward. "They paid me money ter git me hyer, an' they'll hev ter pay me more ter git me out."

"We'll all stay!" roared the crowd.

"And we'll all have to fight," said High Card Harry, grimly. "Did you catch the name at the very bottom of the paper which we just filled with punctuation points? It was that of the champion all-around fighter of Jacktown, a galoot who is little, but wears twelve-inch spurs. Violet Vane is the most dangerous foe we have to contend with. When he goes down for keeps I shall breath easier. He is the one against whom we must direct the heft of our energies. Down with the velvet dandy!"

Brandishing their weapons, the desperate crowd echoed the cry. It looked as if the little sport would have desperate odds to contend against.

"Now," continued the gambler, when silence was restored in a degree, "we must get to business. Probably you all know that I have proclaimed myself Alcalde of Jasper. Is there one among you who wishes to dispute my right to the position and my power as an arbitrator? If there is, let him step forward."

No one stirred.

"It is evident that there will be no trouble about that," smiled the cunning card-sharp. "And now I will tell you what I think we had better do. I think that we had better go into the saloon here and call a meeting to decide upon a plan of action. There are enough of the boys scattered through the town to hold the place or give us warning should the other party make any decided move."

This proposition was favorably received, and the bullet-shattered door swung open to allow the crowd to file into the room at the heels of the self-chosen Alcalde of Jasper City.

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE GAME AND AN UNMASKING.

NIGHT came again and found Jasper City still in the hands of the roughs led by High Card Harry. Despite the marshal's proclamation, the law-respecting citizens had made no move to drive the rioters from the town. But this silence on the part of those whom he considered his foes did not lull the card-sharp into a feeling of security, for he realized that the looked-for onslaught might occur at the most unexpected moment. Bearing this in mind, he kept the soberer and more trustworthy of his followers on the watch at various parts of the camp. Relying on these men, he felt sure that the peaceable citizens could make no organized move without his being apprised of the fact immediately. Having everything thus arranged, he strolled into the Night Hawk Saloon to see how things were moving there. Just as he entered he heard a sharp, crisp voice saying:

"Yes, gents, I am Handy Jack, and I am here to make good the boast when I say that I am the best all-round short-card player in Colorado. I reckon I was born with the devil's bible in my hands and have been fingering it ever since, for I cannot remember the first time that I saw a pack of cards. I am a sport by nature and a sport by profession. I love a good game as I love anything in which there is excitement. I can live on excitement. It is like mother's milk to me. I have been informed that there are some full-blooded sports in this little town, which information caused me to lean in this direction. If you have any real good poker-players, trot 'em out and see me do 'em."

High Card Harry drew back a little and surveyed the boastful speaker. He saw a man somewhat below medium height, whose dress was a strange mixture of Mexican and American attire. There were the sombrero and sash, but on his feet were patent-leathers, and the open front of his jacket showed a "biled" shirt, collar and crimson tie, from the midst of which flashed either a large diamond or a very good imitation. There was another stone in the ring upon the smallest finger of his left hand. No weapons were visible about his person, but his general appearance was decidedly loud, to say the least. His face was covered by a handsome coal-black beard, which appeared to have been carefully trimmed and parted in the middle. His general aspect was that of a dandy crank who dressed in that manner to attract attention. But High Card was cautious, and therefore decided not to be in haste about forming an opinion of the stranger.

After uttering the challenge, the little unknown leaned carelessly against one of the posts in the room and proceeded to produce and light a cigarette while he allowed his dark eyes to rove searchingly over the faces before him. High Card Harry fancied that he was looking for some one. No one stirred to accept the challenge.

"Come, come!" laughed Handy Jack, as the dandy had called himself. "Is this the kind of a place that you call warm? Why, there are lots of towns in Colorado that make no pretensions of being more than half-awake where I could not crow half so loud or long as I have just done without having three or four bantams on my back. Warm! Is this what you call a warm reception? Booh! It chills me!"

And the speaker shivered and drew his jacket close about him in mock pretension of being cold. High Card Harry muttered a curse and took a step forward, but halted suddenly and shook his head.

"No, I'll not dive at the fool just yet," said the gambler, beneath his breath. "Let's see what he will do if given a little more rope. I have more than half a mind that this is some kind of a trick to get me entangled in some scrape. Perhaps our foes are playing the game to get me pinned down to cards while they carry out some kind of a move that I would be liable to thwart if I was looking round. No, if any one climbs Handy Jack, it won't be me."

"Do you all belong to the church?" inquired the stranger sport, mockingly. "Have you suddenly reformed and left all your bad habits in the lurch? I swear it looks that way! Perhaps you have heard of me and are afraid to try me on. I will allow that I am bad medicine, but I supposed I should strike a town which contained some bloods with sand. The reputation of Jasper is wide-spread, but I fancy that I have been misinformed about the place. I reckon this must be a colony of retired Gospel sharps. For Heaven's sake, isn't there one man among you who will come forward and play me

a little game of penny ante, just to keep me from perishing and passing up the flume?"

High Card Harry ground out a guarded oath and again seemed on the point of advancing, but at this moment another voice was heard.

"Whoopee! I'm ther lily-like lulu ye're lookin' fer. I'm er full-blooded sport o' ther ole school—hic!—I be! Wazzer masher with me, hey? If ye want fun, I'm jest ther galoot as kin give ye all ye want. I'm ther boss poker-player frum ther—hic!—town o' Red Hot, I be. My name's Wagg, with Erastus hooked in ther thills. Jesh name yer game an' I'm wish yer."

Once more the woolly-headed man was around, and if appearances were not very deceptive, he was "gloriously elevated." It appeared to be quite a task for him to keep on his feet, and his tongue was very thick, to judge by the words he uttered. For some reason no one within the room had offered to molest him, and since entering he had patronized the bar in a very liberal manner. It is probable that the gang was waiting for the word from High Card Harry before they "climbed" the vagrant from Jacktown.

Wagg reeled up to Handy Jack and halted before the small sport, swaying unsteadily as he delivered the speech just given. Jack surveyed the tramp, and a quizzical smile settled on his face.

"Hello! hello! hello!" he repeated, in three different tones of voice. "Is this the kind of timber that Jasper City produces? Is this a specimen of your terrible sports? Ha! ha! ha! Really I am amused! What do you call this bundle of rags anyway?"

"They call it a terror ter-dawgs," replied the woolly-headed man, grinning in a very "boozy" way, apparently thinking that he had uttered quite a joke.

"I should think it would frighten anything."

"Then you're skeered out—you take—hic!—washer?" came quickly from Erastus, who evidently misunderstood the stranger's meaning. "I knowed it. You hain't got no san', you hain't, arter you done all the crowin'. Hoop! I'm ther bully boy wish ther keards—hic!—I be. Ob, I'm er lulu! Where's ther galoot as wants me ter clean him out o' his loose wealth? I'd like ter git inter er game wish erbout ten ante an' er thousan' fer ther limit."

At this moment Wagg felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and a hoarse voice growled in his ear:

"Get out o' this, you drunken, no-count critter! Stan' back an' give er man er show. You hain't got ernuff stuff erbout ye fer pay fer er drink, say nuthin' 'bout playin' poker. Ef this hyer sport wants amoozement, I can 'commys-date him."

The speaker was a tall, supple-appearing fellow, who was attired in cowboy make-up, and wore a belt around his waist supporting a small arsenal of weapons. His face was covered by a heavy, brown beard, which somehow looked strangely out of place.

Just one look at this person did Erastus take, then he clinched his hand and drew back his fist with a suddenness that caused him to reel back several steps.

"Jeeswax!" growled the drunken tramp. "I'd good mine ter hit yer one. I swan—hic!—I wu'd if 'twarn't fer killin' ye. Who be you, anyhow?"

"I am er bad man ter fool with," was the reply. "I dunno's I've got er name, but I'm generally called ther Tough frum Tucson. I'm an onpleasant man ter r'ile."

The speaker glared savagely at Erastus, as if trying to frighten the vagrant; but Wagg glared back as well as he was able to in his unsteady condition, and shook his fist at the tough.

"I reckon—hic!—I'll hev ter thump ye oncet," nodded the camp tramp. "I'll hev ter do it jest fer luck. I don't reckon you knew w'at ye wash foolin' wish w'en ye kem roun' ole Wagg."

"Oh, ye think ye'd better hit me, do ye! Waal, I dunno but I'll thump you once."

But when the Tough started forward with clinched fists, Wagg began to retreat so suddenly that he lost his balance and fell flat upon his back. This caused a burst of laughter, and with a contemptuous gesture, the Man from Tucson turned from the fallen boaster to the stranger sport.

"I hev ther rocks," the Tucsonite asserted, displaying a roll of bills, "an' w'ile I don't belong in this ole town, I c'u'dn't b'ar ter hear ye crowin' ther way ye was. I know how ter han'le ther keards er leetle, fer I made this pile at poker, an' I didn't git it out o' er tenderfoot either. If you want sport, I'm with yer till I'm broke."

"There, that is business," laughed the dandy. "I was afraid that I could find no fun in this slow town, but it seems that I am going to have a small show, if nothing more. We will take the nearest table, sir."

It did not take them long to get down to business. The game was soon opened with five dollars for the ante, and a thousand as the limit. A crowd of spectators crowded around to witness the sport, among whom was High Card Harry, who scanned both Handy Jack and the Tough from Tucson in a searching manner.

The deal fell to Handy Jack and the game began. The first pot—a light one—was raked down by the Tough.

"Oh! I am really a bad man with ther keerds," laughed the winner. "Ef ther feller I'm playin' with don't win on his own deal, he don't win a tall."

The professional sport smiled.

"By that I should infer that you can put the papers just where you want to. My dear sir, it will prove mighty unpleasant for you if I catch you cheating."

"Who sed ennythin' 'bout cheatin'? I plays a square game, an' if you ketch me cheatin', ye're welcum ter. I reckon I kin chaw you up ennyhow."

"Dost think so, partner? Remember that appearances are oftentimes deceptive. It is safer for me to carry a derringer in each sleeve than for you to carry two aces in one sleeve. If you think not, just try the aces a whirl."

The game went on, and the Tough took the second pot.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed. "I reckon this is a picnic. I thought from your loud talk that you waser mighty chief, but I calkerlate I was off ther trail. Now, honest, can you play a little bit?"

The little man smiled in an unruffled manner. "Oh, yes, I think so. If you don't mind I will take a few of the pots."

And he did, but from the first the Tough raked down the majority of them. The small sport watched his opponent's play very closely, and soon decided that the Man from Tucson was a great hand to bluff. He made no sign of his discovery, but decided to catch him on a big pot, which he finally did, much to the tall man's disgust.

"Never mind," came grimly from the Tough's lips. "I'll make that all right directly. I am goin' ter sink ther knife deep w'en ther chance comes."

And when he held four queens and an ace and discovered that Handy Jack possessed a good hand, he decided that his time had arrived. Jack laid his cards face down on the table, and in a few moments the betting became decidedly brisk. The spectators grew excited when they saw the limit raised several times, and there was a general move to get out of the "line of march" which would probably be taken by the bullets that were expected to follow the showing of hands. Finally Handy Jack called.

"I have four queens and an ace," declared the Tough, laying his cards face upward on the table. "If you have four kings or a straight flush, the money is yours. If not, I scoop the pot."

He spoke calmly and without a trace of the dialect which he had at first assumed. And as calmly Handy Jack asserted:

"I have the four kings."

Then he turned his cards over so that all could see that he spoke the truth. For a moment utter silence reigned, then the Tough from Tucson hissed:

"Devils! I am beaten, but I will see the face beneath that beard."

Like a flash, he snatched away the false beard which concealed the winner's features. As he saw the face revealed, a cry burst from his lips and was echoed by the crowd.

The man thus unmasked was Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport!

CHAPTER XII.

HOT WORDS AND HOTTER WORK.

"VIOLET VANE!"

The name was repeated in accents of amazement by a dozen witnesses of the sudden unmasking. The Velvet Sport's work of the day before had given Jasper's toughs cause to remember his face.

Swift as had been the Tough of Tucson's movement, the man unmasked was equally as quick, and as he raked in his winnings with one hand, with the other he flashed a revolver from some handy pocket and covered the Tucsonite.

For several moments the two men sat in si-

lence, glaring straight into each other's eyes. Finally a light laugh broke from the lips of the venturesome little dandy.

"You have seen my face, partner," he said, as coolly as if he was not surrounded by a murderous band of deadly foes; "but I figure it that you have paid well for the privilege."

"Yesh, tha's er fac'," mumbled the woolly-headed man, as he reeled up to the Tough. "He's paid fer it—hic!—he hash. But now he's seen your face, Sweet Vi'lets, s'posh you take er look at hish."

And with these words, the vagrant seized the Tough's whiskers, gave a quick pull, and lo! they also proved to be false. It was Violet Vane's turn to utter a cry of amazement as he saw the face exposed.

"The Tough from Tucson" was none other but the Velvet Sport's deadly foe, Dandy Dirk!

"Whoopie!" came from the lips of the intoxicated Erastus. "I knowed it all ther time. Ye can't fool ther ole man in thet way. Hooraw! Fush scalp fer 'Rastush!" and he waved the beard wildly around his head.

Seeing that his identity was exposed to the little sport, Dandy reached for a revolver, but Vane's sharp words caused him to pause before his hand touched the butt of the deadly weapon.

"Hold hard, Tom Alicar! If you attempt to draw, you are a dead man!"

There was a look in the dark eyes of the man with the drop that caused Dandy Dirk to shiver in spite of his usually steady nerves. The face of the little sport was like that of an avenging Nemesis.

"Where is my sister?"

Low, cold and stern came the words from Vane's lips. He glared straight into the eyes of the cowering man whom he addressed, and Dandy seemed incapable of making a reply.

"Why don't you answer, you cowardly kidnapper? Where is she? Where is Ione Wilson?"

Still the man addressed spoke not a word. Violet Vane leaned forward till the revolver which he held nearly touched the forehead of the threatened scoundrel.

"Speak, you villain!" he hissed. "Speak, before I bury a bullet in your brain!"

In an instant Dandy seemed to regain some of his usual composure, for a strained laugh broke from his lips.

"Shoot away, my little bantam, if you want to. If you think you will find your sister quicker by dropping me, drop away."

For a moment Vane seemed staggered. Dirk noticed this, and laughed again.

"I thought you would put on the brake when you understood just how things stood. If you salt me, the chance of ever seeing your sister again will be mighty slim."

The Velvet Sport's face paled visibly.

"Ha, ha! That hit you where you live, didn't it?" came mockingly from the slippery bank-breaker. "I thought it would. But I fancy you care more to find Miss Wilson than your sister. The chances are that you will never live to see either of them; and if you do live, it will be but to greet Ione Wilson as Mrs. Thomas Alicar."

For an instant it seemed that Violet Vane would hurl himself across the table straight at the throat of his mocking foe. He half-rose, and Dirk leaned further back in his chair to say:

"Keep your clothes on, baby. You will get into a mighty bad muss if you try it on."

Vane sunk back, still keeping the mocking rascal covered.

"If you dare to harm a hair on her head, you shall suffer the tortures of the damned!" came from the little sport.

"Oh, I'll not harm her, but she shall become my wife just the same. Your sister will probably marry my very dear friend, Harry Harkman, known in these parts as High Card Harry. How do you like the prospect, baby?"

"You villain!"

Dandy bowed.

"That is what some folks call me," he smiled. "Rather an unpleasant word, but unpleasant words hurt no one. Sinner or saint, I seem to hold the winning cards in this game."

Violet Vane seemed little like the cool, nervy sport of the day before. Now that his sweetheart and sister were in danger, his blood seemed to have turned to molten lead. It was with the utmost difficulty that he refrained from shooting his taunting enemy. He seemed to have no thought of his position, surrounded though he was on all sides by deadly foes.

"You shall give them up, or I will wring every drop of blood from your black heart!" cried the little sport.

"Be kind enough to invite me to the wringing will you?" smiled Dandy.

Once more the two gazed into each other's eyes in silence. The crowd looked on breathlessly.

"Thomas Alicar," said Vane, with an attempt at composure, "if you do not tell me where those girls are concealed, I will kill you where you sit! My chance of finding them will be as good then as it is now."

"Do you think so? Well, go on with your killing, then. If you think you can shoot me and get out of this room alive, just try it."

"I will give you one minute in which to consider my words. If you are not ready to speak at the end of that time, you die!"

"It is folly to waste sixty seconds in that manner, for I shall be no more ready to speak when they are past never to return than I am now. I know where the girls are, but I defy you to find them. They are safe in my power."

"The minute is passing."

"Let her pass. If she doesn't hold the cards to open the pot, she had better pass."

"If you do not talk, at the end of the time allotted you pass out of the game forever."

"I may have something to say about that myself. You think one six enough to rake the pot, but I may go you one better, in which case you will be apt to get a raise."

For a few moments utter silence followed these words, then Vane announced:

"Time is up. Will you talk?"

"Yes, I'll talk, and the first thing that I will tell you is that you are covered by half-a-dozen revolvers, held in the hands of as many of my friends who stand behind you. Had I wished to do so, I could have given them the wink some time ago and you would have been riddled with lead."

"Tha's er fac', Sweet Vi'lets," affirmed the woolly-headed man. "They've got yer kivered, but if I don't—hic!—shee double, there's jesh er duzen o' 'em, 'stead o' six. They've all got their re—hic!—solders out an' got ye kivered. I'll bet them resolvers are loaded too, I will."

Violet Vane was in a tight box. For a moment silence followed the camp tramp's words, then a startling and unexpected thing occurred.

A wild yell pealed from the Velvet Sport's lips, and like a flash he kicked his own chair from beneath him and dove under the table at which he and Dirk had been sitting. Up into the air shot the table, and at the same instant Dandy went over backward, his chair being upset by the nimble sport. Then a volley of pistol-shots rung out, followed by cries of pain. Up from the floor sprung the velvet dandy to plunge into the very midst of his foes, striking right and left.

A terribly unequal battle had begun.

But, Violet Vane was not to contend unaided with his many foes. With a whoop, Erastus Wagg was at his side, his drunkenness seeming to disappear like magic.

"Sock it to 'em, Sweet Violets!" bellowed the old ragamuffin, as he plunged into the thickest of the *melee*. "Give 'em Hail Columby an' Yankee Doodle! We kin wallop ther gang! This is w'at stirs er feller's blood. Whoopie! This is ther galorious day o' salvation!"

Whoops, oaths, pistol-shots and all the sounds of a desperate hand-to-hand conflict echoed through the room and the smell of burned powder filled the air.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAUGHING LU CHIPS IN.

SUDDENLY through the smoke of battle which had commenced to gather within the room a brawny form appeared, and, an instant later, Solid Sid, the marshal, launched himself into the midst of the fray, uttering a shout that was heard above all the uproar. The gang knew the marshal, and for a moment there was a lull in the conflict, during which Sid was heard to shout:

"Make way here, make way! Give me room!"

His muscular arms sent the men to the right and left as if they were so many sticks and with little trouble he gained the Velvet Sport's side.

But the pause in the battle was only momentary, for High Card Harry's voice was heard crying:

"Down with him! Jump the velvet dandy! Don't let him escape from this room!"

Thus adjured, the desperado's satellites once more pressed toward the Velvet Sport, who was fighting with Wagg on one side and Solid Sid on the other. In a few moments the conflict became nearly twice as furious as it had been at any previous time.

"Cum on, you heavy hitters!" howled the woolly-headed man, as he worked his arms like

piston-rods, his hard fists catching many a ruffian on some tender spot. "There hain't only three o' us, but we kin make it mighty interestin'-like fer yer hull dirty gang. Jeehocus what a time this is!"

"Back!" roared the marshal. "The man who touches Violet Vane has to walk over my body! You all know me. If you don't let up on this, I'll pull my barkers and wipe out your whole gang."

Sid had the reputation of being a very bad man with a "gun," but his words did not quell the riot. Still the ruffians pressed forward, urged on by the card-sharp and Dandy Dirk. The battle waged fiercer and fiercer and the smoke which filled the room grew dense and suffocating. As if hoping to create consternation in the hearts of their foes, many of the toughs were firing their revolvers straight up at the heavy planks above their heads.

Now that the danger was very great and the odds were against him, Violet Vane seemed to have regained his usual coolness. He kept his eyes on Dandy Dirk and tried to fight his way toward the slippery bank-breaker; but the surging crowd pressed between them and carried them further and further apart. A desperate resolve gleamed in the little sport's eyes and his hands flew to his revolvers. At that moment a most unfortunate thing occurred.

For some reason Solid Sid reeled sideways and fell against his deputy, and then, in some unaccountable manner Violet Vane was hurled to the floor. In a moment he sprung up, but as he was rising, he received a blow on the head that knocked him senseless for the time.

A yell of delight pealed from the lips of the ruffians as they witnessed the Velvet Sport's misfortune. In another instant they would have hurled themselves upon the fallen man and Vane's life would have ended then and there.

Through the room rung a shrill feminine cry and a small figure dashed through the crowd and came to a halt near the unlucky sport.

"Back, you wolves!" came sharply from the girl standing there with a cocked revolver in her right hand—"back, I say! The first man who tries to lay a hand on my brother dies!"

"Laughin' Lu!"

"Ther Queen o' Jasper!"

"She holds ther drop!"

"An' her eyes say shoot!"

"Look out fer cold lead!"

"Hold hard, pard; don't crowd er leddy."

These and a score of similar cries broke from the throng, and in an instant the mad turmoil ceased. As is often the case, one woman had done more than a dozen men could have accomplished.

Like a tragedy queen looked Luona Howard as she stood over the senseless form of her brother, holding the angry crowd at bay with a cocked revolver. More than one of the rough throng gave an involuntary gasp of admiration, and the eyes of all were riveted upon her.

"Are you men?" cried the daring girl, in a ringing voice. "You would murder this helpless man like a dog! For shame! He cannot lift a hand to defend himself, and you, like a pack of ravenous wolves, thirsting for blood, would fling yourselves upon him and end his life here. Men of Jasper, I scarcely thought that of you!"

Ruffians though they were, they could but feel the withering scorn and contempt in her face and voice. Many of them shrunk back, as if to hide from her sharp eyes, but one coarse wretch in the midst of the gang cried out:

"I reckon we've got er reason fer jumpin' ther cuss. He don't love us, an' we ain't dyin' outer 'fecshun fer him."

"A very good reason for committing a murder!" sneered the girl, her dark eyes flashing scornfully. "But you cannot touch him while I live! I will defend him with my life! I fancy I can name the contemptible wretches who are at the bottom of this dastardly piece of business."

Her eyes ran from face to face as if searching for some one. Was Dandy Dirk the man she was looking for? Be this as it may, the Jacktown desperado took good care to keep in the densest of the crowd and avert his face so that she could not recognize him.

With a revolver in either hand, Solid Sid stood at the girl's side, his aspect being that of a man who is undecided what move to make. On the other side stood the woolly-headed vagrant, Erastus Wagg, appearing somewhat amazed, but glaring defiance at the crowd. From his appearance, it was quite evident that his drunkenness had been assumed, for he was quite sober. The camp tramp was a very successful actor in certain lines.

High Card Harry had been amazed at Laughing Lu's sudden appearance in the saloon when he thought her safe in the secret cellar, guarded by two trusty ruffians, and for a time the card-sharp's astonishment rendered him incapable of action; but, with a sudden effort, he became himself once more—a crafty, scheming scoundrel—and turning to the ruffian nearest him, gave a few hurried orders in a low tone of voice. The gambler was not ready to give up all hope of disposing of the man he so bitterly hated, and he intended to again get Vane's sister in his possession, if such a thing was possible.

Suddenly Harry found Dandy Dirk at his side.

"Curse the luck!" hissed the man from Jacktown. "How did she escape!"

"Don't ask me," answered the gambler, in a cautious tone. "She is here; that is all I know about it."

"And the chances are that the other is free too. Their friends have stolen a march on us."

"It looks that way."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to regain possession of Laughing Lu and wipe out her brother."

"How will you work it?"

"I could easily set the gang on her if I wished, but I have a better way. At a signal from me, out go the lights. When they are restored, the girl and her brother will be gone. No one but my special tools will be able to tell what has happened, and I have taken care to select men with close mouths."

"Good enough! Wipe out the velvet dandy by all means! With him removed from our way, we will have little trouble in holding this town. Work lively. Hark! what is she saying?"

"I fancy I can name the wretches at the bottom of this piece of dirty work," repeated the brave girl. "They are cowards and kidnappers! One of them is well known here in Jasper; the other is a villain from Jacktown."

"You've struck 'em first pop, miss, and no mistake."

A cool, placid voice—a voice that sounded strangely familiar to High Card Harry. A moment later a small, seedy, red-bearded man stepped forward and halted beside the girl.

It was the Cool Case!

Lifting his battered high hat, the little man bowed to the girl with a grace that no one would have dreamed him capable of, at the same time saying:

"If you will allow me, Miss Howard, to assist you in holding these creatures off a little. They really look quite ravenous, and I fear they may jump for you at any moment. If they do so"—producing a pair of elegant revolvers—"I may be able to aid you in welcoming them warmly. Ahem!"

Before Luona could make any reply, Erastus exclaimed:

"Jeehocus! It's leetle Casey! Galory! Pard, we kin lick ther room full!"

"Ah-ha!" laughed the strange sport. "So you are here, are you, Erastus of the lamb-like top-knot? Greeting! You and I will stand like a mighty wall between our fair friend and the clans of the enemy. I have their leaders spotted, and when hostilities begin, my lead shall be wafted toward High Card!"

He was interrupted by a wild yell and a fusillade of pistol-shots. Then the lights were suddenly extinguished, and darkness and pandemonium reigned within the Night Hawk Saloon!

CHAPTER XIV.

WANTED FOR MURDER.

A GRAND rush for the doors and windows followed the extinguishing of the lights. There was not a man within the room who did not know that he had one or more enemies near at hand, and he also knew that the darkness would favor the settling of old scores and doing so in a very secret manner. Some of the very men who had stood shoulder to shoulder and howled for the Velvet Sport's blood were the first to make a break for the outer air. In the sudden darkness they ran into and fell over each other, while curses, yells, blows and an occasional pistol-shot made a medley of sounds which were appalling.

It seemed that everything favored High Card Harry's crafty game. In the excitement both Violet Vane and his sister could be seized and carried from the room to some place where they would be safe in the card-sharp's power. If the hated velvet dandy failed to appear again in Jasper, who could say what his fate had been or point to the men who put him "out of the way?"

And when the lights were restored within the saloon, it did seem that the gambler's treacherous trick had succeeded, for both Vane and his sister were gone. Erastus Wagg and the Cool Case had also disappeared.

Solid Sid lay upon the floor, groaning faintly, apparently badly hurt in some way. Within three feet of him lay one of High Card Harry's ruffianly tools with a bullet in his brain, his wicked career ended forever. There were several more of the gang lying on the floor, all severely wounded, making it apparent that some of the desperadoes had tried to settle old scores. Neither High Card or Dandy were in the room.

But, the villainous gambler's scheme had been a failure, for the seedy little sharp, Cool Case, had been looking for just such a move, and the instant the light went out he worked with incredible swiftness. His first move was to invert one of his revolvers and strike a terrible blow with the butt of the weapon, aiming straight toward the spot where he had seen a man's head an instant before the lights went out. Fortune favored the small man, for his revolver landed on the temple of the very man he hoped to hit, dropping that individual like a log. At the same instant that he delivered the blow he cried to Wagg:

"Look out for Vane."

But, already had Erastus seized the Velvet Sport in his arms, having first knocked down a man whom he found over Vane in the darkness. Then the quick-witted vagabond made for the nearest window.

When he got outside, Wagg was amazed and delighted to find the Cool Case at his side, supporting Laughing Lu.

"This way," came sharply from the little sharp's lips. "We must lie ourselves away from this vicinity with all possible speed. A few moments hence this spot will swarm with angry rascals as might a shaken hornets' nest with angry hornets. We had better vanish in the gloaming if we do not wish to be stung."

"Right you are, your reverence. Lead on."

Five minutes later they were in the midst of a little party of friends and Violet Vane was sitting up, rubbing his head in a dazed manner.

"What has happened?" he asked, gazing blankly around, and finally allowing his eyes to rest on the face of his sister, who was beside him.

"I feel as if I had been struck a heavy blow."

"My dear sir," smiled the Cool Case, who was watching Vane with evident interest, "you did receive a gentle tap on the knowledge-box which sent your wits wool-gathering."

"But ye're all right now, pard," asserted Erastus, his face beaming with satisfaction. "I yanked ye outer thet, while leetle Casey looked arter yer sister. They didn't git ther chance ter snuff ye out arter all."

"Ha! I remember!" burst from the little sport's lips. "I was tripped and then struck. After that I know not what happened— But Lu, how came you here? How did you escape from those villains?"

"Ned found us, and—"

"Rescued you? Bless the lad! But where is Ione?"

"No, Ned did not rescue us. Ione is still in the power of those villains, and Ned must be a prisoner also."

With sudden and unlooked-for strength, Vane sprang to his feet.

"Lead me to her!" he cried. "Where is she? I will save her!"

Cool Case's hand fell on the excited sport's arm.

"Easy, partner, easy!" admonished the strange man. "You have a cool head if you keep a tight grip on your nerves, and I know it. Let's hear the lady's story, then we shall know what kind of a place we are going to. It is best to go slow and sure."

The words served to cool the Velvet Sport in a measure, but he began to examine his weapons as Luona told her story. The reader knows what she had to tell up to the time of Ned Morris's appearance.

"When the two men sprung upon him," continued the girl, "I was frozen with terror. I did not seem able to move a hand or foot, but sat staring at the struggle like one fascinated. For a time Ned seemed almost a match for his two assailants, and I began to hope that he would be the victor. But, finally, I saw that they were overpowering him. The realization that he was being conquered broke the spell which seemed to bind me, and my first thought was to aid him in some way. I looked at Ione and saw that she was lying face downward on the bed. The next moment I saw the open trap-door. If I could only escape and go for

assistance! Without being discovered, I reached the corner beneath the opening. The cellar was shallow at best, and we could not quite stand erect in it. To my joy, I found that I could reach up and grasp the edges of the open trap.

"I can scarcely describe what followed till I found myself on the street. I was almost beside myself with fear, for every moment I expected that one of the men would clutch me and drag me down into the cellar. How I ever succeeded in pulling myself up through that opening I cannot tell, but I did so. In some way I found my way out of the cabin to the street. There I halted, not knowing which way to turn. Fate finally led me toward the saloon, through the open door of which I saw my brother. A revolver lay glistening on the floor as I crossed the threshold. I seized the weapon and rushed forward. I need not tell what followed."

Violet Vane had listened with marked impatience to his sister's story, and now asked:

"Can you lead us to that cabin, Lu?"

"I think so, for I took particular notice of its appearance when I was on the street, thinking that I would bring some one to aid poor Ned."

"Then lead us there at once," adjured the nervous fellow. "Every moment we delay but diminishes our chance of rescuing Ione and Ned."

In a few moments the little party was on the street, following Laughing Lu toward the spot where they hoped to find the imperiled ones. In a short time the cabin was reached. The door was closed and everything around it seemed silent and gloomy. Vane uttered an involuntary groan.

"They have taken the alarm and fled," came hoarsely from his lips.

"Pr'aps not," said Erastus, hoping to encourage his little "pard," who seemed strangely unnerved just then. "They w'dn't be very ap' ter 'luminate ther place. They may be thar jest ther same."

Casey said not a word, but immediately tried the door, only to find it fastened. Without an instant's hesitation, the small man hurled himself against the door with such force that it flew open. Then he turned to the others, saying:

"Come on."

The red-headed man stood by the door till they had all entered the cabin, then he closed and fastened it as well as he could. His next move was to produce a small bull's-eye lantern and open the slide.

"You will observe that I am equipped," he laughed softly. "In fact, I have been thar before many a time. Now, Miss Howard, will you show us the locality of that trap-door?"

The door was readily found and opened. Utter darkness reigned in the shallow cellar below!

"It is as I feared," came fiercely from Violet Vane's lips.

Then he fell on his knees and called:

"Ione! Ione! Are you there?"

No answer. All was silent in the secret cellar-prison.

"Give me that lantern," and with it in his possession, Vane sprang into the cellar. A quick survey of the dismal place convinced him that it was indeed deserted.

"Ione, my darling!" he hoarsely breathed.

"If they dare to harm you, I will have their hearts' blood!"

When he became convinced that the place was deserted by the living, he more than half expected to find the dead body of his sister's lover, Ned Morris. Once more he flashed the light around the place, and he drew a breath of relief when he discovered nothing of the dreaded sight he feared to behold.

"They have gone, as I feared," he said as he passed the lantern up to Cool Case and then sprang through the trap into the room. "There is no trace of Ione or Ned. I fear the latter has been disposed of; and they have without doubt removed Ione to another place of confinement."

"Hark!" exclaimed the Cool Case suddenly.

"What's that?"

They all listened and plainly heard a chorus of wild cries and Babel of voices which appeared to be swiftly approaching.

"Suthin's bruck loose," observed the woolly-headed man.

Casey hastened to the front of the cabin and peered out into the street. Several of the others imitated his example.

Swiftly the cries came nearer till a dark body of men appeared hurrying down the street. They halted directly in front of the cabin occupied by our friends, and High Card Harry was heard to cry:

"Surround that building! He is in there!"

The mob quickly obeyed their leader's command, and almost before our friends could understand what was happening they were surrounded by the yelling gang.

"Jeehocus!" grunted the woolly-headed man.

"It looks like we wuz in er tight box!"

Then came the cry:

"Hello, within the cabin!"

To which Erastus promptly responded:

"Hello, yerself, an' see how ye like it!"

"Is Violet Vane in there?"

"None o' ver durned business," was the prompt retort. "Hain't ye glad ye foun' out?"

There was a moment of silence, and then another voice cried:

"We know he is in there, and he may as well come out and give himself up. He is wanted."

"Wanted fer w'at?"

"For murder!" was the amazing reply.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRUGGLE BEGINS IN EARNEST.

FOR a moment the little party within the cabin was speechless with astonishment; then Violet Vane uttered an imprecation, and reached Erastus's side by the window. Before the woolly-headed man could prevent, he cried:

"Yes, I am here, Tom Alicar. I recognize your voice, you vile bank-robber and kidnapper!"

There was a brief silence, then Dandy Dirk shouted, triumphantly:

"I knew you were there, you slippery little devil! We have you foul this time. You may as well surrender."

"Surrender!" retorted the Velvet Sport, scornfully; "never! If you want me you will have to take me."

"An' we'll make it durned interestin' fer your durned gang o' hyenas!" yelled Erastus. "We kin hole ther fort hyer fer all we're wuth. There are jest twenty in hyer, an' every man's armed with er breech-loadin' cannon. W'en we git ter slingin' grape an' canister inter your ranks you'll think you're struck by Ole Death-an'-deestrueshun, you will."

Of course Wagg exaggerated the number within the cabin—he could not repress his natural inclination to "stretch" the truth. Besides that, he thought that if he made the toughs believe that there was a large number within the building, they would not be in such a hurry to attack the place. There were really just eight men within the cabin, the Cool Case having quietly and mysteriously disappeared. Less than half a minute before the ruffians surrounded the place he had silently slipped out of a rear door. Thus far no one had noticed his absence.

"Will some one put a plaster over that fool's mouth?" came angrily from High Card Harry. "Keep him still if you can, while his betters talk."

"You see that the doors and windows are fastened and guarded," Erastus said Vane, "I will parley with these fellows. Have the men prepare for a desperate fight, for we may as well open the ball now as to wait longer. If the other party only learns of our trouble and comes to our assistance, we will be all right, for that gang will be overpowered."

The vagrant turned to obey the little sport's orders, although he could scarcely repress his inclination to fling one more taunt at the ruffians around the cabin. As soon as Wagg left the window, the voice of Dandy Dirk was heard again:

"Are you going to surrender, Violet Vane?"

"Not to you, you dastardly kidnapper!" was the swift reply.

"Then we will pull down the hut over your head. You are charged with murder, and we are bound to have you."

"Charged with the murder of whom?"

"Ducky Splinters."

"And who was Ducky Splinters?"

"A gentleman well known in this place. His friends say that you salted him."

"Splinters was a bummer and tough of the lowest order," volunteered one of the men within the cabin. "If he is dead, the town is well rid of a desperate character, and the respectable citizens will thank the man who put him out of the way for the service he has done them. He was one of High Card Harry's trusted tools."

Vane thanked his informant, and then turned to the window once more.

"When was this gentleman killed?" he inquired of the spokesman for the toughs.

"I reckon you know well ernuff," yelled an unfamiliar voice. "He wuz my pard, an' you laid him out. You've got ter swing fer it, too."

"He was shot in the Night Hawk Saloon,"

answered High Card Harry. "The boys all say that you dropped him."

"I deny the charge, for I did not use my weapons to finish any one."

A yell of derision came from the mob, and the gambler cried:

"That won't hold water! If you have any defense to make, you can make it before the judge. As Alcalde of Jasper, I demand your surrender."

"Have you a warrant?"

"No, nor do I need one. We are here to take you, dead or alive, and we are going to do it. You shall have a fair trial."

The Velvet Sport laughed scornfully.

"A fair trial!" he sneered. "I know the kind of trial I should get. You would all unite in a trial of speed to see how soon you could get to the nearest tree with a good stout limb. No, thank you; no Judge Lynch in mine when the judge is a consummate villain and cowardly wretch."

"Thanks for the compliment," came coolly from the gambler's lips; "but if you are referring to me, I will inform you that there is no way of escaping a trial before Harry Harkman. As alcalde, my word is law."

"But the honest men of the place deny your being the alcalde. By what right do you hold that office?"

"The right of might, and the Sunday-good men of this town will find they have tackled a mighty big job when they attempt to displace me."

At this moment the voice of Dandy Dirk broke in sharply:

"What is the need of all this talk! We are wasting time."

"Ah-a!" cried the sport, at bay. "You are still there, are you? What have you done with Ione Wilson, you dastardly kidnapper?"

"That is for you to find out," was the triumphant reply. "She is safe in my power."

"If you dare to harm her in any way, I will have your heart's blood!" was Vane's fierce declaration.

It was Dirk's turn to laugh.

"When we are through with you," he retorted, "you will not thirst for any one's heart's blood. There is a tree within the limits of Jasper that will bear singular fruit before another sunrise."

To this Vane made no response, but turned to call to Wagg:

"Come here, Erastus."

The woolly-headed man promptly obeyed.

"Where is the small man who broke down the door?"

"Is it Casey you mean?"

"I believe I heard you call him that."

"Waal, I reckon he's gone, pard."

"Gone!" exclaimed the sport. "How can that be? He was here when that gang came down the street."

"I know it, pard; but he wuzn't hyer arter they surrounded ther cabing."

This piece of information startled Vane somewhat. He could not understand how the little red-headed sharp had escaped from the place without being seen. For a moment he was silent, then he said slowly:

"That looks bad. I don't like it, anyway."

"It duz look quare thet he sh'd skin jest w'en we wuz in ther tightest corner," admitted the tramp. "He might have staid an' helped us hole off ther gang."

"That is not what I mean. I fear treachery, old man."

For a brief space of time Wagg was too startled to speak, but he finally exclaimed:

"No, no! Don't git thet inter yer head, pard! Leetle Casey ain't no traitor!"

"But how do you know? Who is he anyway?"

"Waal," drawled the ragged vagabond, "I dunno how I know, but I'm willin' ter bet fifty thousan' erg'in' ten that he hain't crooked. Who he is excep' that he calls hisself a Cool Case, I can't tell. He's er mighty queer critter."

"That is a fact, and that is one reason why I am suspicious of him. Who is he? None of the men with us seem to know him."

"I reckon he must be a stranger in ther camp."

"Then what can be his motive in pretending to be friendly to us?"

To this Erastus could make no reply and could only say that the Cool Case had been friendly to them and had rendered them a great service by coming to their aid when they were hemmed in by roughs in the Night Hawk Saloon.

"Still I do not fully trust him," declared Vane. "We are going to have a desperate fight and must keep an eye open for any foul

move that will give our enemies the advantage of us. Are the doors and windows fastened and guarded?"

"Bet yer boots!"

"And every man is ready to fight?"

"Ter ther death."

"They are calling to me once more. Seethat Lu is in the safest place possible, for I fancy that the fight will begin directly."

Then he again turned to the window.

"What is wanted?"

The voice of High Card Harry responded:

"This is the last call. Will you come forth and surrender? If you refuse I shall let my men loose, and will have you out of there in twenty seconds."

"Well, then, you may as well let them loose, but let me warn you that we shall give you a hot reception. My friends are armed to the teeth and can shoot to kill. We shall make a hole in your little army."

"Bah! You cannot frighten us that way. You are our meat. Ready, boys! Now, fire!"

The ringing command was heard all round the cabin and a perfect rain of lead was poured into the windows and walls. Two of the defenders of the cabin received serious wounds, but the ruffians' shots were immediately answered in a similar manner.

Standing in one of the windows, Violet Vane worked his revolvers with a coolness and rapidity that was quite amazing, and every time his fingers touched a trigger the bullet that left the weapon found a living target. He seemed to bear a charmed life, for although the bullets whistled thickly around him, not one touched his flesh.

Whether he was doing much execution or not, Erastus Wagg was making considerable noise. The crack of his long-barreled revolvers was mingled with his wild yells as he shouted his defiance and derision to those outside the cabin. The other men were doing all they could, and Laughing Lu was lying flat on the cabin floor, where Wagg had told her to get to escape the flying bullets.

High Card Harry did not long delay in giving the order:

"Break down the doors and yank 'em out! Down with the doors! Come on!"

But, the ruffians never hurled themselves against the doors, for at that moment a wild cheer came from up the street. Then down through the darkness swept a band of horsemen, uttering a chorus of yells as they charged on the besiegers of the cabin.

The leader of the party that had so opportunely arrived on the scene was the Cool Case!

Like chaff before a strong wind the ruffians scattered before the mounted men, who began to use their revolvers as soon as they were near enough to discern the forms of the gambler's satellites in the darkness. With a dozen of his supporters following him, Dandy Dirk being of the number, the card-sharp fled down the street, pursued by the victorious horsemen.

Tearing open the cabin door, Violet Vane stood with his empty revolvers in his hands gazing toward the dark retreating mass of men, his eyes noting every red flash and his ears drinking in the sounds of pistol-shots and wild yells.

"The struggle has begun in earnest," he muttered.

CHAPTER XVI.

DANDY DIRK'S DEFIANCE.

THE defeated and furious ruffians took refuge in the Night Hawk Saloon, whither the mounted men, who had so opportunely arrived on the scene of action, could not pursue them. To say that High Card Harry and Dandy Dirk were furious would be expressing it mildly, for both of the baffled villains were fairly beside themselves with rage. The Jacktown desperado nearly swore himself into a fit.

As soon as he regained some of his usual composure, the card-sharp began to inspect the men who had fled to the saloon. He saw that at least two-thirds of his supporters were within the building, but to his surprise he could find nothing of Hickory Jimmy. Saul the Spotter, however, was on hand, and on being questioned, stated that he had seen the wrestler fall at the first fire of the mounted men. This information again filled the gambler with the fiercest rage.

"They shall pay dearly for this night's work!" he raved. "Violet Vane shall hang and some of the too-good-to-live people shall keep him company. Remember, the velvet dandy is marked for the rope. Spare him with your lead."

In the struggle that afterward occurred it is well that Vane's relentless foe gave this order to his men, for more than once could they have dropped the Velvet Sport, but remembering

Harry's words, they refrained from doing so. Both the Jasper City gambler and the Jacktown desperado seemed to feel that Vane was responsible for the condition of affairs, and nothing but the little man's blood would satisfy their craving for revenge.

"Barricade the doors and guard the windows," was High Card Harry's order. "The fight has begun in dead earnest, and it's ten to one that they attempt to drive us out of here before morning. It is not going to be boys' play either."

The gambler took charge of the lower part of the building and sent Dirk to look out for the upper portion. Preparations were made for a regular siege.

"There are more of the boys who should be here," said the self-appointed alcalde. "Where are Hook-Nosed Jim and his party?"

"At ther south eend ov ther camp," replied a man who was standing near.

"I know they were sent to look after the south end; but they were told to join us at the first indications of a regular battle. I cannot understand why they are not here."

Then, after glancing around:

"Hustler Hank and his men do not seem to be here. Haven't they come in from the north?"

"I reckon not."

"Well, then you slip out and send in both parties. You can do so now without trouble in particular, but in a short time from now this building will be surrounded so that such a move will be impossible."

The man hurried away to obey the order, and High Card Harry's amazement and rage cannot be described when, thirty minutes later, his satellite returned with the information that Hook-Nosed Jim and his men were not to be found within the limits of Jasper. The indications were that, fearing the final defeat of the toughs, they had "skipped" while there was yet time to do so. The gambler swore like a trooper.

"Where is the Hustler?" he demanded.

Then came a still greater surprise for the card-sharp. The Hustler and his men had been captured by their enemies and were all prisoners under a close guard. Harry's rage knew no bounds and for a time he was like a madman. When at last he had cooled in a measure, he hissed:

"They have stolen a march on me, but I am not downed by any means. Curse them all! They shall learn what it is to buck against Harry Harkman! I can hold my own in this town, as they will discover before this affair is ended."

Meanwhile the respectable citizens of the camp had been gathering around the building in which the ruffians had taken refuge, and everything seemed to indicate that a combined attack on the place was contemplated. After seeing that his sister was in a place of safety, Violet Vane had joined those around the ruffians' retreat and, by common consent, had practically taken command of the citizens who had resolved to clean out the toughs. Solid Sid could not be found.

As usual Erastus Wagg was on hand. It was very seldom that the camp tramp gave his mouth a rest, and on this occasion he seemed to be "working it for all it was worth."

"Feller-citizens," he bellowed, "we hev run ther enemy ter his hoel. Thar in thet rum-hoel o' ruin he has turned ter show his teeth fer ther las' time. Ther time hes cum w'en he hes got ter succum'. Thet's er pun, but in course if ye hain't eddicated like I be, ye can't 'preciate it. But, if ye hain't eddicated, ye kin fight jest ez hard in this year tussil thet's cumin'. Beyend them walls is ther galoots as hev caused all this ruction. Their leaders are High Keerd Hurrah an' Dandy Dirk, two cusses thet are jest fit fer ther rope. One o' them has proclaimed hissself Alcalde of Jasper, an' he proposes ter run this year camp jest as he durned pleases. Reckon both o' them hes fergut ther time w'en they tackled Violet Vane an' got beaucherfully l-e-f-t, left."

"Sweet Violets takes ther lead—
Er jolly lad, you bet!
We've got ther rascals treed,
An' now we'll make 'em sweat."

Erastus was becoming poetical, but those who heard him sing were inclined to think that he was anything but musical. However his "effusion" caused more than one to smile.

Violet Vane was greatly worried about Ione. The uncertainty of her fate preyed upon him, and he was impatient to get his hands on Dandy Dirk and force the truth from the scoundrel's lips. Perhaps it was this impatience that caused

him to consent when the men begged him to be allowed to charge on the saloon and attempt to dislodge the ruffians at once. Be that as it may, he did consent and he led the charge in person.

It is impossible to describe the terrific battle that followed. A concentrated attack was made on all sides of the saloon, and the besiegers did their best to force an entrance by some of the windows or the doors, but they were finally repulsed with a loss that was far from trifling. The ruffians within the building were in savage earnest, and they had not wasted their lead by any means. More than one of Jasper's citizens received his "last sickness" during the struggle, and at least a dozen were wounded. The damage done the defenders of the saloon could not be determined by the attacking party.

Great was the excitement and rage which the besiegers felt when they learned of their loss, after being forced to retreat before the galling fire poured from the saloon windows. The fallen men's friends swore to have revenge, and the entire party united in pledging themselves to hang together till Jasper was freed of the scoundrels which infested the town. The repulse seemed to make the defeated party all the more determined in their purpose. The wounded were removed to a building near by and their injuries attended to, while the dead were taken in charge by their friends.

It was a black night for Jasper City!

Although he was greatly affected by the repulse, the Velvet Sport successfully disguised his real feelings and did his best to encourage the desperate citizens. He searched everywhere amid the besiegers, hoping to find some one who knew something about the marshal, but no one could give him any information. Solid Sid was not to be found. The Cool Case was also missing.

During the struggle, Erastus Wagg had been safely hidden behind one of the cabins which stood nearest the scene of action. His position afforded him the utmost security from flying lead, while he could listen to the sound of the conflict and feel all the excitement of a combatant. Occasionally he would peer around the corner to see if the attacking party had forced an entrance to the building. The woolly-headed man had a great desire to be with the first to reach the bar of the saloon, and he did not want to expose himself amid the flying bullets for fear something would happen to prevent him from getting there at all.

"It'd be jest my durned luck ter be perforated fu'st off," he muttered. "Someway I feel remarkably peaceful jest now."

And when the struggle was all over, the cautious vagabond mingled with the defeated faction, and boasted about how hard he had fought. Truly, the tramp was an enigma—an unfathomable mixture of cowardice and bravery.

Within the saloon the roughs were jubilant over their victory. They were drinking freely, much to High Card Harry's secret annoyance, and gave vent to their hilarity in wild yells of delight. For reasons of his own, the card-sharp did not come out openly and declare that any one of his followers should not have any more liquor, but he managed to make the barkeeper understand that he did not wish certain ones to have another drink. And the barkeeper was careful not to let them have any—when the gambler was around.

Harry was confident that the defeated citizens would not make another attack that night; and he was right. The rest of the night passed quietly, and morning came. Just at sunrise Violet Vane, bearing a white flag, was seen advancing from one of the cabins a short distance up the street. High Card Harry hastily joined Dandy Dirk in the upper part of the building, and together the two appeared at one of the windows, Dirk covering the Velvet Sport with a cocked revolver, as he cried:

"Halt! What do you want?"

Vane stopped promptly.

"I came to demand the surrender of yourself and that man by your side," he replied, coldly.

The Jacktown desperado laughed sneeringly.

"Well, you have gall! Why should we surrender?"

"Because the citizens of Jasper demand it. I call on those deluded men who are there with you to come out quietly and leave the town. They will be allowed to depart in peace."

"While we will be retained as prisoners?"

"Exactly."

"Bah! I advise you to go soak your head!"

"If you do not surrender," pursued Vane, calmly, "you will be driven from that building before the sun is two hours high."

"My dear sir, do you take us for fools? You can't drive us from this building. You have tried it once, which I should think would be a lesson to you. If you want another dose of the same, sail in again."

"But we shall go about it in an entirely different manner this time."

"And we don't care a continental how you go about it. We hold this saloon and defy you to oust us. Go ahead with your picnic and see which side gets the worst of it."

CHAPTER XVII.

SOLID SID SHOWS HIS HAND.

"PERHAPS you will change your mind when you know what we have decided to do," said the Velvet Sport, as serenely as ever. "The citizens of this place have agreed that the building which you occupy is a disgrace to the town. There are no cabins in the immediate vicinity of the saloon and scarcely a breath of air seems to be stirring this morning. It is an excellent time to make a bonfire of that old ark."

The two desperadoes looked startled. This was something quite unexpected, and for several moments they conversed in low tones. Finally Vane grew impatient and called:

"Well, what do you say—is it surrender or not?"

High Card Harry spoke for the first time:

"So your little band of Sunday-school children have turned incendiaries, have they?" he sneered. "A very commendable method of procedure."

"When we deal with rattlesnakes, we should not have scruples about our methods of handling them. All is fair in war."

"Exactly. But I will tell you one thing: You will not burn this building."

"Then you will accept our terms?"

"Not at all. We still hold the winning hand in this little game. If you would like it, you can see the cards."

Vane was puzzled, but quietly replied:

"I do not catch your meaning."

Dandy Dirk disappeared from the window, and the gambler said:

"We will explain with pleasure. It only takes a knave and a queen to whip the hand you hold. Here they are."

And then Ned Morris and Ione Wilson appeared at the open window, closely guarded by several men. Ned's hands were tightly bound behind him.

"There are my winning cards, dear sir," smiled the card-sharp, as he waved his hand toward the captives. "If you think you have got anything that will lay over them, just trot it out."

For several moments the Velvet Sport was speechless. High Card Harry watched Vane with a look of triumph on his handsome, cruel face.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed. "How do you like their looks, little runt? You may be able to out-cheat me at poker, but I am more than a match for you at this little game."

"You cowardly kidnapper!" cried the Sport, hotly. "You shall be called to an account for this. It is a villainous trick worthy of such a dastardly rascal as you."

"Thanks, awfully," bowed the triumphant man in the window. "I will repeat your words of a short time ago: 'All is fair in war.'"

"We shall conquer you yet," declared Vane. "Beware how you treat your prisoners, for if they are harmed, you will have to answer to me."

"Exactly. They shall not be harmed, unless you see fit to fire this building, in which case they will undoubtedly be cooked in great shape—roasted alive! But I do not fancy you will be so fierce about burning the building."

The sport made no response, and Harry went on:

"You have been making terms to me; now it is my turn to dictate. I am Alcalde of Jasper, a position which I shall hold by fair means or foul, and the men who are bucking against me will have to come under my thumb sooner or later. It will be better for them if they cave at once and give up the fight which can only end in one way. If they are ready to retire peacefully to their homes after surrendering you into my hands, I will agree to straighten things out in this camp and restore order within six hours so that a stranger in the place would not know that anything unusual had occurred. Those are my terms."

Violet Vane bowed.

"That is all I have to say," concluded the triumphant gambler. "The sooner you trot back and get under cover the better it will be for you. Some of the boys may take a notion

to perforate you for all of the fact that you carry a white flag."

And without another word the Velvet Sport turned and walked away, Harry's scornful laugh following him.

"Take away the prisoners, men," was the card-sharp's order. And then, to Dandy Dirk: "I reckon that cooks them fellows. We need not fear a roasting to-day. Ha! ha! Old pard, the game is ours."

"It looks that way," admitted Dirk. "But I do not like the sounds below. I fancy the men are filling with liquor. If you allow them to get drunk, we may lose our grip after all."

"You are right. I must close the bar."

But the bar was not the trouble. A ragged, dirty-looking old fellow, who appeared to be a stranger in the camp and who had entered the saloon in some mysterious way, was getting in his work. He appeared to be loaded down with liquor, for as fast as one bottle was emptied he would produce another from some secret pocket.

"I'm Rattlin' Rufe, ther Rustler frum Rattown," he announced. "An' I've kem inter this hyer camp fer ter hev an ole-fashioned four-legged tear. I'm loaded with ther stuff, an' I want all my frien's ter drink with me. It's ther prime artikle an' mecks er man feel good all over. Hyer ye go, boys; drink hearty."

And, much to the barkeeper's rage, he passed the bottle around. When the regular dispenser of "liquid refreshments" attempted to interfere, declaring that nothing could be drank there that did not come over the bar, the little stranger, Rattlin' Rufe, threw him down and sat astride his body while the bottles continued to go round.

When High Card Harry and Dandy Dirk came down the stairs, Rattlin' Rufe managed to slip past them and ascend to the upper story, where the bottles once more went a merry round. When the card-sharp learned the facts and came to search for the Rustler, that individual seemed to have mysteriously disappeared. He must either have been an adept at disguises or have known the secret hiding-places of the building very well for a stranger.

When Violet Vane reported to his friends there was consternation indeed. It did seem that the ruffians held the winning cards. Erastus Wagg was wild with rage.

"I'll go out an' lick ther hull durned gang!" he raved. "I kin do it! I'll let 'em see ther kind o' stuff Erastus Wagg is made out of, I will! I'd like ter git my han's onter thet High Keerd Hurrah. W'u'dn't I make him smart! Durn his hide! I'm goin' ter challenge him ter immortal combat!"

And, before any one could restrain him, the woolly-headed man pranced down the street toward the Night Hawk Saloon. He paused about five rods from the building, toward which he shook both fists, while he roared:

"Whar's High Keerd Hurrah? Let ther durned sneak come out hyer an' fight er man! He's er coward frum Craven Crick! I kin lick ther best two men ye've got in thet ole hoel. My name is Wagg. Whoopee!"

At this point Saul Spot appeared at a window, and with a single well-directed shot knocked the boaster's hat from his head. This seemed to take Erastus by surprise, for, without pausing to recover his head apparel, he wheeled and fled from that dangerous locality as fast as his legs would carry him. With a laugh, the pistol dead-shot sent a few bullets whistling past the fleeing man's ears, and Mr. Wagg did not pause till he was safe behind a large dry-goods box which sat in front of the nearest store.

After this there were no more signs of hostilities for nearly an hour. At last the door of the saloon opened, and a man stepped forth, bearing a white flag. A cry of surprise came from the besiegers.

It was the marshal, Solid Sid!

Without a pause the marshal came forward till he had joined the besiegers. His face looked very grave, and his first words were:

"Where is Violet Vane?"

Sid's deputy instantly stepped forward.

"I am here, sir. Do you bring us word that those ruffians have concluded to surrender?"

Sharon shook his head.

"No; I have come on different business. I am sorry, sir, but it is my duty to arrest you."

"To arrest me!" repeated Vane, in utter amazement. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"But what is the charge against me?"

"Murder. You killed Duck Splinters in the Night Hawk Saloon."

"It is false! I know nothing about it!"

"You will have a chance to prove that when

the case comes to trial. I hope you will have no hard feelings against me, but I must do my duty."

"Stop!" came sharply from the Velvet Sport's lips, as the marshal took a step forward. "Wait a moment, Mr. Sharon! I cannot submit to arrest now, but I will give you my word of honor that as soon as the trouble in this camp is settled, and Mr. Morris and Miss Wilson are rescued from the power of those villains, I will stand my trial and take the consequences. While they are in danger I must have my freedom."

"I would like to accommodate you very much, but it is impossible. Duty is duty, and it is my duty to arrest you now. Please come with me."

And then, just as the marshal's fingers touched Vane's shoulder, the sport's hand flew out and a hard fist caught Solid Sid under the chin. Two-thirds of the witnesses afterward declared that it was the handsomest knock-down blow they ever saw.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GRAND CLEAN-OUT.

THAT the little sport had knocked the brawny marshal down with one swinging left-hander seemed hardly possible and not a few who witnessed the feat caught their breath with a gasp of amazement. For a single moment the unlucky man seemed stunned, then he suddenly sat up, uttering a fierce oath and reaching for a revolver.

"Go a little slow, pard; I have you lined."

Violet Vane spoke the truth as the fallen man could plainly see. The sport's right hand held a shining revolver and the drop covered Solid Sid's brain.

"I mean business from the shoulder," came calmly from Vane's lips. "This charge of murder is a piece of bosh hatched up by my enemies for the purpose of having some pretext for getting me out of the way. I can see through the whole scheme, but I am amazed to discover that you are in with the rascals, Sharon. I hardly thought that of you."

"I have to do my duty when called on," declared Solid Sid, glaring vengefully at the little man who held the drop. "For that purpose I came here. You shall discover that it is no trifling thing to resist an officer of the law. I promise to make you sweat for that blow."

"Spare your threats," sternly commanded the Velvet Sport. "I am not in a mood to listen to them, for I fancy that I see through your little game. You are hand and glove with those villains, a thing which I half suspected ever since you tripped me in the saloon last night. You did that little trick very neatly and it seemed like an accident, but I now know that it was intentional. You have been playing a treacherous game from the first. How much did High Card Harry and Tom Alicar give you to induce me to come to Jasper City, where, in the midst of enemies, I could be easily disposed of? I fancy they find the disposing of me a harder trick than they imagined it would be."

"Your insinuations are false," asserted Sid, as he slowly arose to his feet. "I induced you to come here to aid me in quelling this riot, and I made you my deputy."

"And now you want to arrest me for killing a man while attending to my duty as an officer! That is a little thin, my dear sir. It won't hold water. Your object is only too plain. You have shown your hand in great shape. A pretty officer, you are! I reckon this town will have to elect a new marshal as soon as things are straightened out again."

"How soon will that be?" sneered the burly traitor. "From the present indications, it will not be very soon. At the present time, the men within that building appear to have the best of the situation. In the future, Harry Harkman is apt to make the laws of this town."

"There!" laughed Vane; "now you are coming out in your true colors and showing your sympathy with Harkman and his rascally followers. Bah! Once I did think you a man, but now I know you for the treacherous two-faced whelp that you are! The best thing that you can do is to get back with your mates in that building. Git! Go before I am tempted to give you what you deserve—a dose of lead!"

Casting one vindictive look at the speaker, Sid turned and walked straight back toward the saloon, the door of which opened before him and closed when he had entered.

Vane was congratulated by his friends on the very neat manner in which he had handled the brawny officer, who had never before met his match since becoming marshal of Jasper.

But the Velvet Sport was moody and silent, for he was greatly troubled by the condition of affairs. Had not his foes held young Mor-

ris and Ione in their power, he would have known how to act, but as it was, he knew not what to do. While he was buried in deep meditation, Erastus Wagg appeared at his side. The woolly-headed man was somewhat excited.

"Pard," he hoarsely whispered, "hev ye notissed ennythin' unusual over thar?" pointing toward the saloon.

"No, I have not. What do you mean?"

"Say, don't ye observe that it's reemarkably kinder quiet like in the ole ark?"

"It does seem quiet," admitted Vane; "but what of that?"

"I dunno; but I reckon thar's su'thin' tuck place over thar. I've bin roun' onter thar back side o' thet coop an' see'd er feller cum ter one o' thet winders an' beckon ter me. I c'dn't tell ef I knowed jest who it wuz, but I reckon he's a frien' o' ourn. Ef I'm right, thar's su'thin' in thet wind."

The sport sprung to his feet.

"You may be right!" he cried, eagerly. "Show me that window as soon as possible."

Without further words, Wagg led the way round the building. Finally he halted.

"Thar's thet very winder," he declared, as he pointed toward the saloon.

And then an exclamation of surprise came from the lips of both, for at that moment a man whom they recognized appeared at the window.

It was the Cool Case!

Seeing Vane and Erastus, the little sharp began to make signals to them. Both men watched him closely, but could not make out what he meant. Finally the man at the window seemed to hit upon an idea, for he changed his mode of signaling.

"W'at in thunder's he tryin' ter do?" asked the tramp.

"He is using the deaf and dumb alphabet to communicate with us," was the reply, as the sport put up his hands and made a few rapid passes. "I understand him."

And when the signaling ceased, Vane turned swiftly away, saying:

"There is work ahead of us, old man. I fancy we will soon have the winning hand in this desperate game. That man says that more than two-thirds of the ruffians within that building are drugged, and in a drunken sleep. He will admit us by that window, and we can take them by surprise. Our first work is to get a part of the men here without attracting the attention of those within the building who are not drugged. That will not be an easy task."

Nevertheless, it was accomplished. Silently the men stole up to the rear of the building, Vane leading. Cool Case was there, and he promptly opened the window, through which the men passed into the saloon. A large number had gained admittance when the fact was discovered by Dandy Dirk.

What a battle followed!

The men who had not partaken of the drugged liquor made a desperate resistance. Their comrades were unable to do so, for they were lying on the floor, wrapped in a slumber which even the sound of battle failed to break. But the "rebels" were finally overpowered and forced to surrender. This did not happen, however, till High Card Harry deserted his then useless tools, and Dandy Dirk fell, mortally wounded.

Then what a cheer went up from the victors! "Hooraw!" roared Erastus Wagg. "Hooraw fer us! We've downed thet skunks, an' Sweet Violets led us ter vict'ry! Three cheers fer thet posy sport!"

The cheers were given with a will, but when they had ceased, Vane said:

"It is not I to whom you owe this success, but to the man who ventured into this den and succeeded in drugging our foes. He took desperate chances, and but for him we might have met with defeat in the end. I propose three cheers for Cool Case."

They were given, three and a tiger. The little red-headed sharp, who was bending over Dandy Dirk, arose.

"Gentlemen, I thank you," he said, bowing gravely. "I fancy you do me too much honor. As Rattlin' Rufe, the Rustler from Rat-town, I did delude these gentlemen somewhat and succeeded in filling the most of them with drugged liquor. But, it is a part of my trade to deceive. I have deceived you all. You know me as Coolan Casey, 'the Cool Case,' but when I remove this beard and wig you will see that I am—"

"Alan Dale, the detective!"

"Exactly," bowed the crafty little bloodhound. "I am Alan Dale, and this wounded man is my prisoner. He is wanted back in the East for a bank robbery."

"But you will never take me there," asserted Dirk, with a touch of triumph in his voice. "I have got it for good. Within an hour I shall be a dead man."

He spoke the truth, for he lived barely fifty minutes, but during that time he made a confession which was taken down by Alan Dale and signed by several witnesses. The confession cleared Philip Vane Howard of the last suspicion that he was in any way connected with the Burnton Bank robbery and left him with an untarnished name.

High Card Harry and Saul Spot were not to be found. They had escaped in some mysterious manner, and neither of them was ever again seen in Jasper City. Solid Sid and Hickory Jimmy were among the prisoners, but, at Vane's request, were not treated any more severely than the others, all of whom were disarmed, escorted to the southern extremity of the camp and given one hour's start of the Vigilance Committee which was afterward organized. The committee were like bloodhounds on the trail, and it was said that a dozen trees within twenty miles of Jasper bore "human fruit" before nightfall.

The citizens of Jasper were unanimous in offering Violet Vane the office lately held by Solid Sid, but, much to their disappointment, he declined to accept.

Alan Dale decided to accompany Vane to Jacktown, from which place the detective intended to return East.

It was quite a jubilant little party that left Jasper City that afternoon and turned their faces toward Jacktown. Of them all none was more elated over the happy result than Erastus Wagg, who bestrode his old white horse with the grace of a monarch, while he waved his dilapidated hat and cheered back at the cheering crowd who were watching them off, till he was quite hoarse. Ione and Luona rode beside their respective lovers, and were very happy, indeed.

Before Jacktown was reached they were met by a party from the place, coming to take a hand in the struggle at Jasper City. Mr. Wilson was with them. Despite the fact that Vane had promised to restore Ione to him within three days if he would remain at Jacktown, he had started for Jasper. His joy at seeing his daughter alive and well must be imagined.

At Jacktown every one turned out to greet the victors, and the people were wild with enthusiasm when the party rode into the camp. Judge Blowbugle recovered from his "booze" sufficiently to appear on the steps of the Silver Bell and shout thickly:

"Zare zey cum! Hoop! Zare's er two Queens ov Shacktown! Zare's Vierlet Vane, zer bully boy wish zer glash eye! Hoop! He ish zer feller ash warms zem up! Hooray fer him!"

The people from Jacktown looked upon Violet Vane as a conquering hero, and once more the camp echoed with their cheers for the man in velvet.

THE END.

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